

MIND'S EYE THEATRE

Immersion
Secrets



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BUY THE TICKET, TAKE THE RIDE

A Meditation on Immersion and Safety Calibration in Mind's Eye Theatre

By Jason Andrew

"Buy the ticket, take the ride...and if it occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced conscious expansion."

— Hunter S. Thompson

The moment of truth, the precipice of change, rarely comes at a convenient time and place of our own choosing. It is our hope that **Mind's Eye Theatre: Immersion Secrets** marks the phase of a new evolution, perhaps even a revolution, within our community. This anthology features fourteen essays that introduce methodology and meta-techniques designed to encourage deeper immersion and enhance safety calibration within your local chronicle and the greater Mind's Eye Theatre (MET) community. Many of these inventive ideas and concepts were pioneered in other live-action roleplaying (LARP) traditions, but the terminology and examples within this anthology follow the Mind's Eye Theatre branding and terminology.

So you might be asking, where does this anthology fit into the scheme of Mind's Eye Theatre, and why might it be important to you?

Since the publication of **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** in December 2013, By Night Studios has watched in awe as the game's community built chronicles and shared stories. We've grown with you as we progressed to other books, including **MET: Storyteller Secrets** and the mammoth **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse**. Our future together continues to look bright with **MET: Vampire The Masquerade, Volume 2** and **Mind's Eye Theatre: Changeling The Dreaming** in development.

Our primary goal has always been to serve the community we love. The last four years, we've engaged with players and Storytellers. We listened thoughtfully to your questions and feedback. We've engaged in the debates and discussions on how to improve the community and address some of its problems. Initially, our general gut feeling was that this topic was something for each community and chronicle to determine for themselves and discover their own preferences. As we listened and engaged with

you, the community, we realized that sometimes people need the language to discuss a concept and understand it in the fullness of time.

The primary goal of the By Night Studios Development Team is to create an ever-expanding toolbox for players and Storytellers alike to use constructing the chronicles of their dreams. Our metaphor to encapsulate this primary design principle is simple. Imagine the rules of Mind's Eye Theatre as a cup. The purpose of a cup is to hold liquid and give it form. Story is the liquid. It is given shape by the rules, but ultimately it is the reason the cup exists.

We've since learned that there are two additional parts to the metaphor that aren't as self-explanatory as we once believed. We realized that the community needed tools, tips, and guidelines in order to calibrate the level of immersion in their chronicles and ensure the safety of all participants.

Immersion is a word thrown around a good deal in multiple LARP traditions and interactive entertainment venues. Mind's Eye Theatre defines immersion as the emotional bleed that a player feels based on the events her character might experience and suffer. This concept is granular in scale and can and should be calibrated to the needs and desires of each specific troupe. Some chronicles might crave a high-drama, emotional experience. Other chronicles might prefer blood and gore and frights. The subtle choices are nearly infinite, and they can be made to tailor the experience desired. To extend the previous design metaphor, immersion is the flavor of the liquid (story) held by the cup (rules).

To fully explore immersion and the opportunities it presents, we realized that we'd also need methods beyond the Golden Rules of Mind's Eye TheatreLARPs. To return to the design metaphor, these new safety methods would be the handle of the cup, ensuring no one is burned.

By Night Studios sought unique voices from both within the Mind's Eye Theatre community and outsider perspectives from experts working in other LARP and immersive traditions. We've included several perspectives from experts in this anthology. Each essay represents a distinct approach that Storytellers and players can leverage to calibrate immersion and ensure the safety of your troupe.

The moment of truth, the precipice of change, rarely comes at a convenient time and place of our own choosing. This is our time, and the choice for our fellowship and community is ours. We've come a long way since that first boxed set titled *Masquerade*, and now it's time to take the next step in our evolution.

Permit me, if you will, a brief indulgence, a meditation on my own past, what this anthology might mean for our community, and a roadmap for the future. Mind's Eye Theatre changed my life. I started playing more than twenty years ago in Seattle, Washington. Here in this community, I met cherished friends and life partners, learned valuable skills, and happily wandered into a career I never imagined.

Two decades ago, I was not the same man that's writing this essay. I was an angry, bitter young person who held up the **World of Darkness** and playing in its beautiful horrors as a badge of honor. I endured and thrived the great killboxes, epic character feuds, and gnarly tales of gore and grimdark. My favorite chronicle to this very day remains the immortal *Race to Cain 2000*, a blood-soaked diablerie-fest, competitive game between my closest friends and I.

Feelings were often needlessly hurt those days. It wasn't that we lacked the human empathy to prevent such things, but rather we lacked the basic vocabulary and tradition to properly communicate. By Night Studios has been using a version of some of the meta-techniques found in this anthology in our boutique chronicles (**Blood & Betrayal** and **Rage & Retribution**), but it didn't initially occur to us to document them, because it was simply how we learned to run games over the years. If we can internalize these new methods into our community, we can potentially increase the fun for everyone and keep people feeling safe.

Some have vocalized the fear that this new wave of change will dilute the flavor of the **World of Darkness**. Others are concerned that unscrupulous players will attempt to use these meta-techniques to avoid game consequences or skirt around the spirit of the rules of the game. Speaking as someone who loves Mind's Eye Theatre, I am excited to have more tools in the box to build future chronicles and tell better stories. We can have rules, story, immersion, and safety calibration; we don't have to sacrifice any of these things for the sake of the others. We can have intensely emotional scenes side-by-side with the merciless killboxes at convention games. Each chronicle can have it exactly the way they choose.

Johanna Koljonen said something at her workshop at the 2017 World of Darkness: Berlin event that has stuck in my head, "People are more important than games." It will take time for players and Storytellers to digest this material and figure out the best way to incorporate what works for their chronicles, but if it helps even one player feel more comfortable and safe, then isn't it worth it?

You've bought the ticket. You've put countless hours into your characters and your chronicle. Let's take the ride together and see where it might take us.

Welcome to **Mind's Eye Theatre: Immersion Secrets**.

Biography

Jason Andrew is a writer, editor, and game designer. He lives in Seattle, Washington with his two partners Lisa and Andrea, and his pug, Otter. By day, he works as a mild-mannered technical writer. By night, he writes stories of the fantastic and occasionally fights crime. As a child, Jason spent his Saturdays watching the Creature Feature classics and furiously scribbling down stories. His first short story, written at age six, titled "The Wolfman Eats Perry Mason" was severely rejected. It also caused his grandmother to watch him very closely for a few years.

Jason is a rabid gamer, having written for several role-playing games, including as *Call of Cthulhu* and *Shadowrun*. He serves as the Line Developer for **Mind's Eye Theatre** for **By Night Studios**, producing a number of MET products including **MET: Vampire The Masquerade**, **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse**, and the upcoming **MET: Changeling: The Dreaming**.



STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PLAYERS AND GAME STAFF

By Jessica Karels

Imagine that you are looking at your social media account after taking the weekend for yourself. Between work and other obligations, you needed to unplug from the world for a few days. Your **Mind's Eye Theatre** (MET) chronicle's social media page alerts you to several new posts regarding your game, some of which tag you directly. As their Storyteller, you assume that your players have questions about when downtimes are due or need a rules clarification, so you look at the updates. Your players blindside you. One member of your MET game has accused another member of cheating. Some of the respondents question whether you were aware and complacent, since the accused is one of your friends. Others comment a few hours after the initial postings, speculating that your silence implied either guilt or a lack of caring. One of your players chimed in stating that you were likely away from your computer for the weekend, only to be dismissed by those who felt that you could—and should—have checked your social media account on your phone.

We have more tools than ever to keep in touch with our fellow **Mind's Eye Theatre** participants. At the same time, the public and near-instant nature of social media means that Storytellers are sometimes the last to learn about issues with their MET games unless they are plugged in 24-7. If we want to leverage these tools effectively, we need to have a plan in place to handle game-related incidents before they become a public relations crisis for your chronicle. This preparation includes empowering your players to share constructive feedback and having a process in place for addressing their concerns. Without such frameworks in place, by the time that we have the opportunity to respond, the damage to our community—and to our own enjoyment of running a MET game—is already done.

What is at Stake?

Whether your players air their grievances through social media or at a local social event, they will cause the same consequences for your **Mind's Eye Theatre** chronicle, community, and ultimately your enjoyment of storytelling.

Misinformation is Spread

Very rarely does a player have a perfect understanding of a game-related situation. This limited perspective is especially prevalent in **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** LARPs, where part of the focus is intrigue and misdirection.

Trust is Broken

Few players consider the out-of-game consequences of rumor-mongering. Players can come to distrust their Storytellers—and each other—when there is a perception of wrongdoing. Some players may opt to avoid pushing their characters' goals out of fear that they will be accused of cheating if they succeed.

Example: *In your **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** LARP, Natalie spent months' worth of downtimes in order for her character, Nicki the Nosferatu, to learn that Billie the Brujah is a Sabbat infiltrator. When the opportunity presented itself, those secrets were sold and brought to light, resulting in political fallout and Billie's execution. Infuriated, Brad (Billie's player) publicly accuses Natalie of metagaming, as he believes that there was no possible way for her character to find out about Billie's dark secret. Rumors spread about speculated personal reasons regarding why Natalie may have targeted Brad through his character. As a result, Natalie feels less inclined to have her character seek out information about other player-characters, fearing another negative out-of-character reaction.*

Risk of Staff Burnout Increases

Storytelling is supposed to be a rewarding task, allowing you collaborate with the players in your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game to create a shared story. When players focus on negative out-of-character aspects of game, that takes away time and energy from collective story-building. If the potential for players to air their grievances online on public venues exists, you essentially become "on call" for crisis management. Our community has lost many energetic Storytellers due to burn-out caused by social media negativity.

Example: Your Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse chronicle just had a combat-heavy game session. Several players meet up afterwards at a local restaurant in order to socialize. During this time, some grieve for the characters that died, while others try to piece together why so much PC death occurred. Rather than consider that misinformation may have been relayed in-character in order to set up an ambush, the players speculate about whether or not the Storytellers intentionally targeted high-profile characters. As rumors and theories spread across the local MET game's community, the "Storyteller vs. player" mentality cements itself. This situation results in some of the Storytellers stepping down, as they do not feel they can build a shared story with their players second-guessing them.

Why "Go Talk to the Staff" Doesn't Always Work

The simplest response to this problem is to encourage players to speak with their Storytellers regarding grievances they may have about game. After all, it's the Storyteller's "job" to ensure that the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game is fair on an out-of-character level, right? While some players may feel comfortable voicing their concerns directly to their Storyteller, others shy away from doing so. There are many reasons that members of your MET game might not feel comfortable voicing their concerns. Here are a few key reasons:

They Fear Reprisal

Some players are concerned about the consequences of speaking up. They think that the Storyteller will take negative feedback personally and will target their characters. While this seems like an odd line of logic, some of your players may have experienced such reactions in other **Mind's Eye Theatre** games. If you are friends with the players in your MET chronicle, they may also fear that you will take their complaints personally, thus damaging your friendship.

They Don't Know What to Say

Sharing potentially negative feedback with someone can be an intimidating experience, especially when the person whom we are addressing is a friend or a person in a position of authority (or both!) Sometimes it feels easier to vent online or to a group of friends than to directly address someone who has the power to fix a situation.

Example: Michelle is a member of the previously mentioned **Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse** chronicle that had a combat-focused session. While she had fun at that game session (her character was able to do some cool things), she is disheartened by her fellow players' reactions. She asks some of them why they don't reach out to the Storytellers with

their concerns. Some of the players admit to Michelle that they are friends with members of the Storytelling team and don't know how to directly express their frustration without having it come across as a personal attack.

They Think that Their Concerns Will Be Ignored

Most players are reasonable enough to understand that not every piece of feedback will be acted upon. However, some participants refuse to speak up, because they feel that their thoughts and ideas will be dismissed outright. This preconception is also prevalent in cases where player concerns involve potential wrongdoing (cheating, harassment, etc.) by another member of the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game. Your players may fear that you will simply believe the accused instead of them or not see the problem as being severe enough to act upon. They see public outcries as a way of holding their Storytellers accountable—forcing them to react or face disgrace.

Example: Brad was a member of several **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** chronicles, some of which did not handle accusations of cheating seriously. When his character, Billie the Brujah, was outed as a Sabbat infiltrator, he had a hard time accepting that the discovery could have been made in-character. Brad is fairly certain that Natalie, the player of Nicki the Nosferatu, metagamed that information. Due to his past experiences, when accusations of cheating were ignored, he is hesitant to bring those concerns privately to the Storytellers. He thinks that by going to social media to accuse Natalie of cheating, he will be more successful at getting a response from the Storytelling staff.

As the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". You can take steps to empower your players to constructively share their ideas and concerns. While this preparation may not completely eliminate game-related negativity from social media, these tactics can reduce the potential for such outbursts. Most players want their MET live-action roleplaying (LARP) game to be fun, for their community to be healthy, and that members turn to social media as a last resort.

Creating a Safer Space

A safe space is an environment that allows your players to voice their concerns without judgment. They may be emotionally invested in the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game, and thus have strong feelings about what is going on and how they (and others) are being affected. Thus, a safe space must also allow players to be able to express those emotions without judgement or repercussions.

That said, there are a few things that a safe space is not. First, it is not a place where players can expect to be placated. They may have strong convictions about what course of

action you should take as a Storyteller—you are in no way obligated to comply. Second, it is not a place where the players' views are seen as infallible. They may not have all of the information about a situation. In some cases, information may need to be withheld from them, especially if it is plot-related. Third, a safe space does not give players permission to be abusive towards other members of the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game or the Storytelling staff. While it is okay for them to feel upset about issues within the MET chronicle, it is not okay for them to direct those feelings towards others in a harmful manner.

Consider these three options to support your players' need for a safer space:

Anonymous Feedback Form

Create an online form allowing a player to provide feedback to the Storytelling staff without needing to provide personal information. While this method addresses the concerns of players who fear retribution, it can also create challenges for the Storytelling staff. If players' input is unclear, there is no way to contact them for follow-up.

Player Representative

Some Mind's Eye Theatre chronicles have a player elected to this position; its purpose is to provide someone designated to approach the Storytelling staff about participant concerns. Sometimes the Player Representative acts as a mediator between the Storyteller and the players. Other times, it acts as a buffer, so that players can keep their feedback anonymous. It is important that whoever is elected into this role has the trust of both the Storytelling staff and the player base. In addition, the Player Representative needs to be able to maintain confidentiality of both the players and Storytellers, as the MET game's staff may share private information with them in order to provide context behind their decisions. Unless the Player Representatives set communication boundaries with the MET LARP community, they may find themselves constantly "on call" for various issues.

Example: *Michelle reaches out to the Storytellers of her Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse chronicle to let them know about player concerns regarding their recent combat-focused session and the deaths of several high-profile characters. Surprisingly, this is the first time that the Storytelling team has heard about player concerns regarding their game. At the start of the next session, the Storytellers announce that they are creating a new position in the chronicle in order to encourage players to provide feedback to the Storytellers. After an election process, the player base chooses Michelle as their Player Representative. Players email her with concerns when they do not feel comfortable directly approaching the Storytellers, and she attends Storyteller staff meetings to ensure that those issues are addressed.*

Town Halls

There are situations where a **Mind's Eye Theatre** chronicle may benefit from everyone being able to sit down and voice their shared concerns. The purpose of a town hall is not to "name and shame" one's fellow players or staff, but rather to draw attention to visible problems with the MET game and collaborate on a solution. Work with your MET chronicle to identify a facilitator who can keep the conversations on-topic and a scribe who can take minutes. These assistants will allow you to be in the moment during a town hall and to focus on listening to your players.

Example: *Brad posted on social media about his frustrations with the local Minds Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade chronicle, specifically with how he believes that Storytellers don't address issues of cheating. He calls out Natalie, a fellow player, and accuses her of metagaming information that her character could not have obtained. Other players step forward, making similar accusations about fellow players. To respond to the building animosity, the Storytellers set up a town hall meeting for their players. At this meeting, they not only publicly state that the accusations of cheating have been investigated, but they also reiterate the themes of intrigue and misdirection that are inherent in a MET: Vampire The Masquerade LARP. Together, the Storytellers and players discuss how to document information that is discovered in-character so that future accusations of cheating and metagaming can be quickly addressed. Brad apologizes to Natalie for his initial reaction and promises to give his fellow players the benefit of the doubt.*

Framework for Feedback

Sometimes, players struggle to find words that convey their thoughts and feelings about a situation, especially when addressing someone in authority. "This game sucks" may seem easy to express, but it does not identify the problem or show how to potentially improve the situation. Your players may need help articulating their concerns and a desired outcome. Walk them through the following four questions:

What is the Problem?

Encourage your players to answer this question with direct observations. Guide them to use "I" based statements, such as "I heard," "I noticed," or "I saw."

Why is this a Problem?

This question prompts your players to share their perceptions and opinions about what they observed. ("I think/feel this is an issue because....")

What Might Happen if this Problem isn't Addressed?

Sometimes a player's concern isn't solely about what happened in the past, but what it might lead to in the future.

What Solution Would You Recommend, and Why?

Mind's Eye Theatre players tend to be problem-solvers, and your participants may come up with options that you might not have otherwise considered. Asking them "why" also encourages them to show how their proposed solution fixes the problem and mitigates the outcome they are concerned about.

Example 1: *"I'm surprised that Billie the Brujah's dark secret was revealed at the last game session. At a party last week, Brad mentioned that his character's secret was so well hidden that no one could possibly find out! Natalie — Nicki the Nosferatu's player (the one who revealed the secret) — was also at the party, and Brad thinks that she overheard the conversation and metagamed that information. If she did, that's cheating and it will hurt our game in the long run. I think that the Storytellers should make sure that Natalie's character got the information legitimately and let the players know so that this rumor does not fester."*

Example 2: *"At our last game session, I saw the Storytellers high-fiving each other and seeming excited after the end of combat. While I understand that they may be excited about running a seamless mass combat using the **Mind's Eye Theatre** rules, I feel this is an issue, because it comes across as them congratulating themselves for killing off characters. My concern is that the players of the characters who died will feel like they were targeted by the Storytellers and may not come back to game. I think that the Storytellers should reach out to those players and check in to let them know that their feelings of loss are valid, and to work with those players to build new characters, so that they can come back to game."*

Advice on Receiving Feedback

We devote a lot of time and energy into building our **Mind's Eye Theatre** games and communities. It can hurt when we find out that something has gone wrong. Here are some tips to receive feedback from your players in a productive way:

Treat Feedback as a Gift

You have been given the opportunity to fix a problem and improve your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game. Doing so will build trust with your players and show that you are responsive to their needs and concerns.

Listen to Understand, Not to Respond

We can become emotionally attached to our creations, and sometimes we perceive a critique of the creation as a critique of ourselves. This feeling leads to a desire to defend ourselves and what we helped to create. If we listen to respond, then the person who is sharing feedback may become equally defensive. Focus on trying to better understand their point of view first before trying to determine a solution.

Remember that Their Emotions are Due to Personal Investment

Some of your players may feel hurt or angry about what is going on at the game. That does not mean that they are angry at you or feel that you hurt them. Acknowledge their passion and concern about your shared hobby.

Responding to the Community

You have educated your players on the ways that they can share feedback and given them a framework to do so constructively. Some may still not come forward, because they are concerned that their ideas will go into a digital "black hole." It is important to establish expectations with your players about when they can expect to receive a response, and through which channels you will communicate to them.

The First Contact

When a player reaches out to you, you ideally want to send an initial response within one to three days of that initial point of contact. The purpose of this message is to acknowledge receipt of their communication and to ask clarifying questions as needed. In some instances, you may be able to respond to your player's question or concern in a single response.

Keep your players informed about the expected response time for inquiry emails. Have this information posted in writing on your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game's website or in a monthly email with other game-related announcements. If you plan to be away from game-related stuff for an extended period of time, let your players know in advance or set up an "out of office" response for your Storyteller email account.

Follow-up Communications

You have multiple avenues through which to continue conversations with your players. If both of you are comfortable discussing the topic solely through email, by all means do so. Sometimes, one or both parties may find it easier to communicate verbally. In those cases, feel free to discuss the matter over the phone, by video chat, or

in person. Afterwards, send a summary email to the player to recount the discussion. This practice not only ensures that both parties are on the same page, but provides documentation to prevent any “he said / she said” down the road.

Documentation is Key

Our memories are not infallible. Sometimes they can be rather selective. Also, a **Mind’s Eye Theatre** chronicle may go through multiple Storytellers, and knowledge of past issues may help future Storytellers in managing the MET game.

There are a couple of options for documentation procedures, depending on the resources available to your **Mind’s Eye Theatre** game. At the very minimum, consider having a dedicated email account for the Storyteller role. This tool allows you to sort messages based on topic (and perhaps issue) so that your successors will have access to past messages. If you use Gmail for your Storyteller account, you can also create digital notes summarizing the various issues and responses. If your MET game has the resources, consider developing (or purchasing) a platform to better organize this information. There are many client relationship management tools on the market—ranging from free/open-source to subscription-based—that can help you log ongoing game-related concerns and your communications with your players.

Example: *Your Mind’s Eye Theatre chronicle developed a communication plan in order to address player concerns. The Storytellers have a shared calendar where they list “office hours” for responding to player emails, as well as coordinating which team members attend specific community events like post-game meetups. If a player brings up an issue at an in-person event, the Storytellers are instructed to have the player email the team for documentation purposes. The shared Storyteller email account is organized so that issues pending resolution are highlighted and do not get lost in the shuffle. Your game’s Player Representative uses a case-tracking system in order to log player complaints and inquiries and track the outcomes in ways that can be researched later, if needed.*

Public versus Private?

One of the reasons driving the player trend to air grievances on social media is that it forces transparency. Your players have an investment in your **Mind’s Eye Theatre** game and want to ensure that their concerns—and the concerns of their fellow participants—are acted upon. While this intention may be well meant, it can shift a MET game’s dynamic from being collaborative to accusatory, putting the burden on your MET game’s staff to prove that they are responsive.

Work with your players to determine what game-related issues should be brought forth to the entire MET chronicle, as well as what channels of communication should be used. Some MET chronicles send out an announcement email on a regular basis, while others limit announcements to a player assembly right before the start of game. There is no one right way to do this—figure out what works for your MET game and run with it.

Policy-related issues, such as rules changes, should be announced to your players, with written follow-up reminders in case someone missed the initial announcement. This practice gives players the opportunity to ask questions or give input both in person and online. The email reminder also serves to document when the rules changes were made and announced, in order to prevent the perception that rules were changed without player knowledge.

Disciplinary issues need not be made public to the whole **Mind’s Eye Theatre** game. Some chronicles announce disciplinary actions in order to show that problem behaviors will not be tolerated. Others choose not to, feeling that disciplined players do not need to be humiliated by making their punishments public. However, if someone brought forward an accusation of wrongdoing against another player, it is important to let them know when the investigation is completed as well as the outcome. This practice will assure them that their concerns were addressed and inform them if their own perceptions were wrong.

Concluding Thoughts

Our players are one of our best resources for identifying ways to help improve our **Mind’s Eye Theatre** LARPs. It is important for us to guide them to ways that they can constructively share their ideas or voice concerns. They can become our greatest detractors, but also our greatest advocates. If your players know that there are multiple ways to share feedback and that their voices will be heard, they are more likely to tell others within the MET game to use these tools.

Biography

Jessica Karels has over 15 years of experience in developing and supporting gaming communities. She held a number of global administrative positions in *One World By Night* (Admissions, Marketing, and Head Coordinator) before founding *The Hidden Parlor* in late 2015. She uses her code-geek skills to make web applications to streamline the administrative side of networked games. There is no truth to the rumor that she’s really a dragon in human form, even though she has a hoard of shiny things and gamer books (including a signed copy of *The Shining Host* — the MET rules for **Changeling: the Dreaming**).

RITUALIZING THE LARP EXPERIENCE

By Sarah Lynne Bowman

Live-action roleplaying (LARP) is a ritualistic human activity involving co-creation and narrative enactment. Storytellers can more thoroughly ritualize the LARP experience in order to create a greater sense of communal trust and psychological safety before, during, and after play. For example, pre-game *workshops* help establish a more cohesive collaborative ensemble, enhance connections within the community, and help players learn how to prepare for intense play in a consensual manner. During play, *safety and calibration* mechanics allow players the ability to adjust scenes based upon their emotional needs. After play, *de-roleing* is a method of gently transitioning from the character back to the player, keeping the aspects that the player wishes to retain and leaving behind the less-desirable facets. Post-game *structured debriefing* is a method of discussing emotionally intense experiences in a serious and constructive manner, allowing players the opportunity to process any unresolved feelings. *Direct communication* and *out-of-character socializing* between LARP sessions facilitate a stronger interconnectedness between players, as they become better acquainted in the mundane social context. Ultimately, these activities work to create stronger, ritualized boundaries around the LARP experience in order to help players maintain friendships and transition from the game state back to daily life.

Intensity is an inherent aspect of LARP, as many players enjoy engaging with emotionally potent and challenging content. In *Mind's Eye Theatre* (MET) games, this content often involves exploring characters and story lines that defy social norms, express shadow aspects of one's personality, and touch upon taboo topics. While playing such content for extended periods of time can provide insight into the human experience through a metaphorical lens, this sort of play can also lead to a vulnerable state known as *bleed*, where emotions, thoughts, and relationship dynamics spill over from player to character and vice versa. While bleed itself is a neutral experience, some players view it as intensely cathartic, transformative, and instructive. Alternately, others may experience damage to their personal lives and communities as the result of unmanaged bleed. Therefore, ritualizing the LARP experience is particularly helpful in order to afford players the opportunity to process any bleed emotions that might arise.

Ritual, the Magic Circle, and Bleed

Ritual is an activity in which participants leave behind their usual social roles and inhabit a temporary, performative space as a group. LARP itself is a form of ritual. LARPers prepare to enter the ritual space through character planning, costuming, and other pre-game activities. Then, players enter what ritual theory calls a *liminal space*: a communal experience where social roles change and the rules of interaction are temporarily shifted. During the liminality of LARP, players adopt a new fictional reality according to the setting, rules, and norms of the play culture. After the end of the LARP, players return to their mundane social reality, discarding the roles of the liminal space, but not the memories. Many LARPers feel fundamentally changed by the peak experiences that occur in games. Rituals are most successful when all three phases of this process are clearly denoted and bounded. LARP is no exception.

In game studies, scholars often refer to the mental and physical space of games as the *magic circle*, where players temporarily adopt new rules of reality and identity. From a ritual perspective, the events that transpire within the magic circle occur during the liminal phase. In order to enter this magic circle and engage in the ritual activity, LARPers must adhere to a social contract of some sort, which is established during the pre-game preparation phase. In an MET LARP, this social contract may involve conventions about not touching others without explicit consent, when to remain in character, or how to use mechanics to moderate in-game disputes. The social contract contains rules that are both implicit and explicit and, therefore, can vary from group to group. The social contract facilitates liminality by establishing agreed-upon rules of engagement.

When engaged in liminal play through the lens of the character, the fictional reality allows participants some measure of freedom from responsibility for their in-character actions, which is called *alibi*. For instance, because the social contract for MET games often involves accepting that adult or "dark" content will emerge, LARPers often use the alibi of "in-character does not equal out-of-character" in order to distance their own actions from those taken during play. From the perspective of ritual

theory, alibi is a way to delineate the difference between experiences that transpire within the liminal phase from those outside of it.

Unfortunately, the social contract of alibi is not always sufficient as a means to transition smoothly between these states. Players can experience bleed, where emotions from their characters spill over into their mundane lives and vice versa. *Bleed-in* occurs when aspects from the outside world affect in-game experiences, such as in-character romances developing due to out-of-character attractions, out-of-character disputes impacting in-character rivalries, and so on. Similarly, *bleed-out* happens when in-character emotions affect players out-of-character. Bleed is neither inherently positive nor negative, although players can perceive bleed as good or bad. For example, a player experiencing a sense of greater confidence after playing an influential role in a *Vampire: The Masquerade* LARP might consider such emotions “positive bleed.” Alternatively, a participant facing the dissolution of a friendship due to an in-character rivalry might consider this experience “negative bleed.”

Ultimately, bleed is often the reason why players engage in LARP. LARPer enjoy the emotions experienced while in a state of play, whether tragic, exhilarating, amusing, or solemn. In order for LARP to engage players, the game

operates at a higher level of intensity than daily life, with many eventful moments occurring in a short amount of time. Without some degree of bleed, players would likely feel bored.

However, problems can occur when bleed is not managed well by a community. The ethos of the “in-character does not equal out-of-character” alibi often puts the onus on individual players to handle their own bleed. This statement implies that people who experience emotional difficulties due to events in a LARP are solely responsible for their reactions. While personal accountability is important to emphasize, viewing LARP as a ritual activity extends the responsibility to the group by reinforcing the collective, collaborative nature of the game.

Certain group behaviors can intensify the potential for long-term bleed. For example, many MET chronicle LARPer spend extended periods of time engaged in *if-game thinking*, where they contemplate actions that their characters may take between game sessions. The planning and deployment of downtime actions is an example of *if-game thinking*. LARPer also may enact scenes over email, chat programs, online forums, or in-person between sessions. While none of these behaviors are inherently problematic, they extend the magic circle for longer than a single game session. These activities also increase the

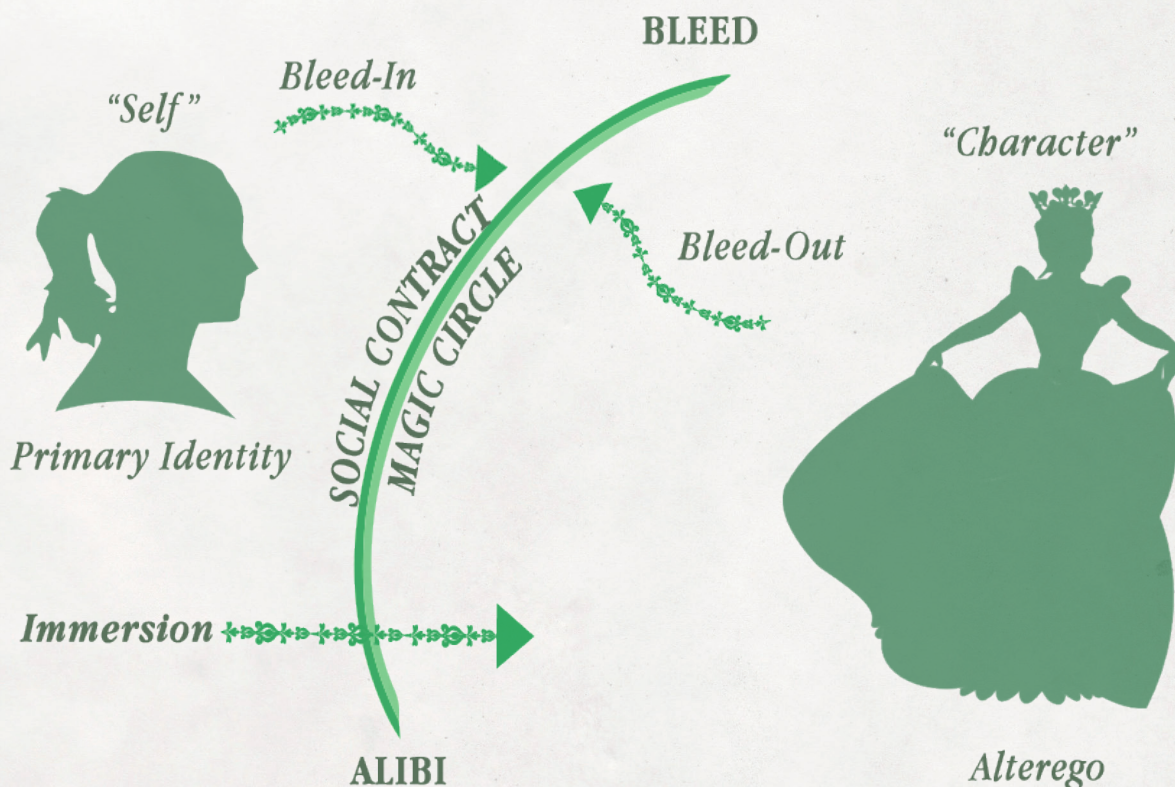


Figure 1: Diagram of the relationship between the social contract, magic circle, alibi, and bleed. Image by Mat Auryn.

amount of time that a player experiences *immersion* in the game world, whether through strategic planning or character enactment.

Through these actions, the ritual phases of preparation, liminality, and return become blurred and less distinct. While involvement between game sessions can feel invigorating, when players are consistently engaged in the fiction, they can also experience the more unpleasant aspects of bleed. Tensions in the community can increase, which may lead to groups splitting off and friendships dissolving. The potential for these problems to emerge intensifies the longer a player participates in a particular setting, MET chronicle, or character, as attachment to that particular fiction grows increasingly stronger. This attachment causes many players to prioritize protecting the game world and characters as important parts of their lived experience, rather than focusing upon maintaining the out-of-character harmony of the group.

Strengthening the Ritual Circle

Communities can minimize the complications that arise from bleed and other in-group conflicts by strengthening the ritual circle in a variety of ways. These methods can help players transition from the game to mundane life, as well as reinforce communal bonds. A few examples include:

1. *Workshops*: LARP groups can formalize the preparation phase through *workshopping*. Workshops are a way for players to get to know one another, explore their characters, practice mechanics, and build trust as a group. One helpful workshop strategy is *hot seat*, during which players interview someone's character and they answer accordingly. Hot seat is used in the workshops for *End of the Line*, the **Vampire: The Masquerade** LARP by Odyssé Participation Agency. Another workshop technique involves playing out freeform scenes as a group, including backstories, fantasies, nightmares, future possibilities, etc. This technique is formalized in the structure of *Convention of Thorns*, the White Wolf LARP by Dziobak LARP Studios.

Workshop play increases the transparency of the fiction, as players externalize aspects of their characters that might otherwise remain hidden. Although the surprise of revealing these aspects during game is diminished, the collaboration between players to create a shared storytelling experience is maximized. This collaborative style helps cement the group as an ensemble of players working together toward a common goal, rather than a collection of individuals with their own agendas and interests operating within the same game.

2. *Safety and Calibration Mechanics*: The liminal phase, while exciting, can also become overwhelming,

confusing, or frustrating. Instituting safety mechanics can help players feel more comfortable communicating their needs within the group. Examples include *cut*, which allows players to end a scene for any reason; *brake*, which enables players to decrease the intensity of a scene; the *OK check-in system*, where participants make sure their scene partners are emotionally capable of proceeding by using non-verbal communication: flashing the "okay" hand signal, then replying with thumbs-up, so-so, or thumbs-down; the *lookdown*, where a player can leave a scene without comment for any reason by placing their hand over their eyes and walking away; the *X-card*, where players can ask for a certain topic to be excluded from play for any reason; etc. These mechanics also serve as a form of calibration, allowing players to adjust the tone, intensity, and content of a scene in order to better align with the rest of the group.

3. *De-roleing*: One effective strategy for formalizing the return phase is *de-roleing*, where players ritualistically shed their character after the game session is done. Group de-roleing strategies include taking a piece of costuming and placing it in a circle; verbalizing what elements of the character the player would like to take with them and what characteristics they wish to leave behind; a player writing a letter to her character; introducing oneself with one's player name rather than her character's; and using the third person to describe character actions in post-game stories.
4. *Debriefing*: Additionally, LARP groups can formalize the return phase through structured and informal *debriefing*. Structured debriefing is a facilitated form of storytelling after a LARP, during which each participant is encouraged to share moments from the game that elicited strong emotions. Other players are discouraged from commenting or interrupting during this sharing process. The debrief practice tends to be serious in tone and focuses on emotional content, such as bleed. Debriefing is distinct from the *war story* practice, during which players enjoy telling informal narratives about the game, often in a humorous or excited tone. Both practices help participants process the experience and transition to mundane life, but debriefing makes space for players to discuss the more complex and confusing emotions that may arise from bleed. Game critiques are discouraged within debriefing spaces, as are accusations toward players due to their characters' actions.
5. *Direct Communication*: When problems arise due to bleed or other game-related conflicts, mature direct communication between players – whether moderated or on an individual basis – can help tremendously. Some players harbor grudges or hurt feelings that can last months or even years due to unresolved tensions.

Many of these tensions are resolvable through immediate and direct discussion between the parties involved, with an emphasis on empathy, kindness, and trust.

6. *Out-of-Character Socializing*: Many groups host informal social gatherings as a way for players to get to know one another outside of the game. These events can include charity drives, dinners, parties, or other meetups. Additionally, online discussion through social media or other forums can increase people's engagement with the community. The more people learn about one another's mundane social lives, the easier they can contextualize each other's in-character actions from a broader perspective. Additionally, out-of-character social activities allow space for informal debriefing, war story telling, and direct communication to take place.

While many other strategies exist, these practices can help reinforce the boundary between fictional events and mundane life.

Conclusion

By emphasizing the ritualistic nature of the experience and strengthening the magic circle, LARP groups can demonstrate that emotional responses such as bleed are a normal part of roleplaying. Furthermore, ritualized practices such as workshoping, safety mechanics, and debriefing make clear that individual and community health are more important than games. Ultimately, these techniques can help Storytellers establish more distinct boundaries around theirLARPs, creating a more cohesive and intense ritual experience.

Biography

Sarah Lynne Bowman (Ph.D.) is a role-playing games scholar, designer, and organizer. McFarland Press published her dissertation in 2010 as *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. Bowman served as an editor for *The Wyrd Con Companion Book* from 2012-2015 and is a Coordinating Editor for the *International Journal of Role-playing*. She was the lead organizer for the Living Games Conference 2016 and helped coordinate the Role-playing and Simulation in Education Conference at Texas State University. Bowman has played and organized **World of Darkness** larps since 1998. In 2016, she helped design workshops for *End of the Line* in New Orleans and *Convention of Thorns* in Poland, as well as contributing character writing for *Enlightenment in Blood* in Berlin.

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CREATING AN INGREDIENT LIST FOR YOUR GAME

By *Danielle Lauzon*

When a player reads a game book—which includes its themes, setting, and rules—she often believes she has done everything necessary to understand the game. Empowered with this knowledge, she then seeks other players, but everyone interprets information a little differently. Players come to a game with their own expectations for that game's themes and moods—including their own beliefs about which elements deserve emphasis and which are background features. The Storyteller may have a different view about those same things, and she may want to run a game that is significantly different in focus from the players' expectations. Each player may anticipate different kinds of stories, and they may differ on which scenes should have prominence. As a Storyteller, you have an obligation to work with your players to understand their expectations, but to also express your own expectations for the game. Some Storytellers enjoy running deep, meaningful games with intense personal plot, high social drama, and low combat. Running such a game for a group of players who expect combat every game will not end well.

The question is, how does a Storyteller convey what her game is going to be like and ensure all her players are on board with her ideas before they come to the game? Clearly, the answer is communication, but more specifically, the Storyteller can provide the players with a detailed list of game elements that may or may not show up in the game. This ingredient list serves to inform players about the game before they ever show up, giving them the ability to opt into the game or not. The list can include anything a Storyteller wishes to convey to players, from character prohibitions to detailed lists of the themes and moods she expects to explore in the course of her chronicle. The list can include house rules, special expectations for portraying certain character types, and any limitations on characters available in the game.

Importance of Opting In

Not all games are for all people. For games like *Mind's Eye Theatre (MET): Vampire The Masquerade*, where the content is vast and the focus certainly varies, a player may fixate on one particular aspect of the game that they enjoy the most. Without prior knowledge regarding the game's focus, players have no way of knowing what to expect or

if their preferred elements will be represented in the game. Managing expectations is not always easy. People like having agency in their own stories and often react poorly when they feel a lack of agency in games.

Someone who makes a character dedicated to social intrigue in a **MET: Vampire The Masquerade** LARP is unlikely to react well to constant physical threats, either from other player-characters or Storyteller plots. She probably feels that the other players—and possibly the Storyteller—have marginalized her choices, and her expectations are shattered. She loses trust in her Storyteller and fellow players, which creates a bad atmosphere within the game. If the player knew beforehand that the game focused on combat, she could have decided to play a different character, or not play the game at all. Either way, she would be making an informed decision to opt into the game. Having that information is a powerful tool, allowing people to manage their own expectations for a chronicle.

While many people prefer certain play styles more than others, players are more likely to conform to a described play style if they know to do so before entering the game. Players who have access to information about the game's expected play style can determine if they are interested in it and arrive at the game with shared expectations. This preparation increases the enjoyment level of all participants. Some people may choose not to come to a game based on its ingredient list, while for others, the ingredient list may provide information that encourages them to attend.

A **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** game may focus completely on the social aspects of inter-tribe politics and Garou/Fera interactions. Without the knowledge to opt into such a game, players may find themselves at a loss when they expect the game to include combat at least once a session.

A **MET: Vampire The Masquerade** game may focus on the interplay between vampires and mortals, and the importance of secrecy and the Masquerade. Players who opt into this game are likely to recognize that fights between vampires might not occur often, and they can instead create their characters to deal with mortal threats.

The goal of constructing an ingredient list is to gather a group of players who share and understand the expectations of the game's organizer and choose to play

within that framework. This tool increases the enjoyment of all people involved and helps prevent hurt feelings from misunderstandings born of different interpretations and expectations.

The Ingredient List

New players need a quick way to know if a game is for them. A 30-page document explaining how the game they are about to play differs from the game they read about in the published rulebook is not the first thing new players want to read to find out if a game is for them. An ingredient list should be—by nature—a quick look at the elements in play in a particular chronicle. It should give a player enough information to make an informed decision about opting into the game, while still being brief.

Much like other informative lists, this overview should be short enough to hold attention, but should still cover the important details. The elements of an ingredient list are up its creator, but keep in mind that this list is likely to be a player's first encounter with the game. The following suggestions illustrate some of the information to convey within an ingredient list. It could include any or all of these elements, and maybe more, depending on the type of LARP you are running.

Note the Focus of the Game

Call out specific themes and elements that are likely to show up during game sessions. Avoid reiterating the rulebook.

- *Call out types of scenes:* heavy or light combat, high/low interaction with non-player characters, high/low social intrigue. For **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse**, you might specify that you expect a great deal of time spent performing moots, traveling within the Umbra, fighting against the Wyrms, or all three. For **MET: Vampire The Masquerade**, you might state that you expect a great deal of time spent in the Prince's court, fighting Sabbat/Camarilla, or dealing with mortals.
- *Give content warnings, either of acceptable or unacceptable content.* Consider including statements about the frequency or acceptability of scenes that would require an R-rating: lots of blood and gore, little to no torture, and no sexual assault. You could also include a specific list of elements that might or might not show up. For **MET: Vampire The Masquerade**, you could mention that Harpies are expected to publicly ridicule characters.
- *You can give the game a rating,* as most players understand what differentiates a PG game from a PG-13 or X-rated game. For example, **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** game might be rated R because

Pentex is particularly active and performs terrible experiments on people, leading to a high amount of body horror in the game.

Define Social Contracts Between Players

Describe common in-character actions expected of characters. Note that by coming to the game, the players implicitly agree to act a certain way during play sessions. These social contracts help people understand what kinds of in-character actions are acceptable and which might cause out-of-character disappointment.

- *Include information about how frequently player-versus-player actions should be expected during a game.* A **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** game may focus on physical combat between player-characters as Rite of Passage to increase Rank, or the game may focus on non-player-character conflict, preventing many player-directed plots.
- *Include an expectation of how often characters might die during the chronicle.* This outcome could be likely even if the game is not necessarily combat-heavy, but players expect to have high player-versus-player conflict.
- *Describe specific setting information.* A **MET: Vampire The Masquerade** Storyteller may ask players to reinforce the importance of boons, honor the Traditions, and utilize social status in game.

Explain Out-of-Game Player Expectations

Set expectations for standards of behavior while at game, and provide a clear list of consequences for breaking these rules. This element of your list could take the form of an entire code of conduct or a simple statement of intent from the Storyteller.

- *Include a code of conduct.* It does not need to be long, but it is useful to provide statements that protect marginalized groups, showing that your game is a safe space for such players. Consider including statements about discrimination, physical contact with other players, and social situations that are not acceptable.
- *Include anti-harassment statements.* Provide a concrete consequence for out-of-game harassment, and make clear which behaviors constitute harassment. Repercussions could be as simple as dismissal from game, or as complex as a tiered system for first-time versus multiple offenders.
- *Include information about alcohol use, drug use, sexual activities, and other out-of-game activities that may occur at the game.* Specify which are prohibited and which people should expect to see. For example, a game organizer may choose to prohibit any substance use on the game site, or may allow anything legally allowed by the state.

Inform Players About Rule Variations or Restrictions

If your game utilizes house rules or other variations from the published game material, mention them in the ingredient list.

- *House rules and rule revisions:* Unless rule changes are simple or easy to explain, it is not necessary to include a full description of your revisions. Often, it is enough to mention the game uses house rules or changes how it runs certain scenes. If your changes require a lengthy separate document, mention that such a document exists. A **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** game may change how characters increase in Rank or change specific Gifts to better fit the game's needs, for example.
- *If your game has special restrictions on playable character types or special requirements for play,* those details should be included in your list as well. A **MET: Vampire The Masquerade** LARP may have additional restrictions on certain clans or generations and may require a written request for playing them.

Describe In-Game or Roleplay Expectations

If your game has specific expectations for players who wish to play certain character types, include those in your ingredient list. Again, this information does not need to be an essay on how to portray a character, but should take the form of a statement such as, "Players of elder characters are expected to reinforce setting, meet with the Storytellers at least once between games, and refrain from engaging directly in non-player-character driven plot."

Example Ingredient Lists

The following example ingredient lists are not the only way to format such information. Your list could be as simple as a set of keywords meant to convey the focus of the game, or as complex as a bulleted list of game elements.

Examples include:

- "Camarilla-focused, rules-heavy, combat-heavy, NPC-run-city, violence, high social intrigue, low political intrigue"
- "Our **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** game utilizes all the moods and themes found in the core rulebook, including violence, sexual assault, and character death. Vampires are deadly creatures and should be treated as such. We utilize freeform techniques to handle in-game conflicts where appropriate. Players are expected to treat each other with respect, and violators will be removed from the game. We do not allow players to portray characters with Elder generation in our game."

- "This **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** game includes the following themes: graphic violence, in-game drug use, in- and out-of-game alcohol use, torture, social ostracizing, in-game shaming, discrimination based on character breed, tribe, auspice or Rank, and liberal use of curse words. This game will never include: actual violence, actual drug use, portrayal of sexual assault, or discrimination based on race, religion, gender, or sexual preference. All werewolf tribes and Ranks are available as per the core rulebook, though we expect players to adhere to their tribe and Rank descriptions, and reinforce setting through their roleplay. We have restricted our game to two Fera characters per 10 players. Our game uses house rules that are available upon request. This game encourages player-character actions against other player-characters on a social and political level determined somewhat by auspice, and the Storyteller will provide plenty of physical threats."
- "Our game is focused on the **Vampire The Masquerade** Sabbat setting. The game is intense and immersive. We utilize a high production level of set pieces, costuming, and props, and expect our players to do so as well. We explore mature themes including, but not limited to:

- ◇ *Ritualized violence*—Sabbat packs may utilize bloodletting, human or animal sacrifice, scarification, or brutality of its members in rituals.
- ◇ *Ritualized sexual acts*—Packs may ritualize sex acts between members or humans during rituals.
- ◇ *Sexual violence*—Sabbat packs may use abuse, subjugation, and violent acts as a way to control each other or humans.
- ◇ *Racism*—In some cases, packs may explore racism in its various forms, either as an intense personal drama, or as part of a ritual.
- ◇ *Sexism*—Packs may explore gender roles, gender conformity, and the consequences thereof during gameplay.
- ◇ *Torture*—Sabbat packs may use abuse, torture, deprivation, and violence as a way to control each other or humans.

We will never explore plots or themes that involve children, and expect our players to refrain from bringing themes revolving around children into the game.

We believe in consent-based roleplay, and players agree to ask for consent before engaging in mature themes with another player and to check in on a regular basis to ensure continued consent within a scene. If players decide to opt out of the scene, we use a fade to black technique immediately to end the scene. We ask our players to refrain from alcohol use during game, as

this can inhibit a person's ability to follow our strict consent guidelines. Contact the Storytelling staff about the clans available for play."

Where to Display?

An ingredient list is most effective if players have access to it before they make characters and come to game. If you have a website, Facebook page, wiki, or any other online resource, the ingredient list should be one of the first things the players see when visiting. The more avenues used to spread the ingredient list to players, the better. When a new player sends an e-mail, responses should include a link to the list. It is sometimes worthwhile to verbally explain the major aspects of your list before each game and have a printed copy for players who decide to show up last-minute.

In conclusion, the expectations that people bring with them to games could result in play style clashes, feelings of disappointment and loss of agency, and possibly anger between players. To best mitigate player expectations, Storytellers should communicate to the players their

expectations for the themes, moods, player conduct and character conduct while in the game. Armed with this knowledge prior to game, each player can make an informed decision about if she wants to attend the game, what kind of character to make, and how she is expected to act while in the game space.

Biography

Danielle Lauzon is a game designer, writer, developer, gamer, and LARPer living in Houston, Texas with her two dogs, two cats, and one husband. She currently works for John Wick Presents as the LARP developer, and she works for Onyx Path writing and developing. When she isn't writing, developing, designing, or otherwise occupied in getting games organized, she is playing games instead.



FADE TO BLACK

From Film to LARP

By Genevieve Iseult Eldredge

The art of storytelling changes with us. As our cultural needs shift, so do our stories—and the way we tell them. Once, our predecessors looked to oral and written traditions; now, many of us are drawn to visual storytelling. It's hard to deny that our society is becoming more and more visually oriented. Perhaps because of this predilection, we often mine film and TV for rich storytelling techniques and seek to build on them.

Mind's Eye Theatre (MET) employs many storytelling techniques we see every day in film and TV. It makes sense to employ visual techniques for live-action roleplaying (LARP), since much of what we do in **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade (MET: VTM)** and **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse (MET: WTA)** is visual—creating a story directly from the minds and thoughts of the players. Thus, it is instinctual to utilize film techniques during play—techniques such as *Fade to Black* (FTB). In film, FTB takes the story “off screen” by fading out of a scene, leaving the viewers to imagine what, exactly, has occurred. This method can be used to pass time or to increase tension.

But how do we take a technique like *Fade to Black* from film and use it successfully in a live-action setting such as **MET: VTM** and **MET: WTA**?

Traditional Use of Fade to Black

In some instances, FTB can be used precisely in the same way. For instance, in film, FTB is often used to signal the passing of time. The scene darkens as it ends, and we come up on a new scene. It's presumed that time passes, but because nothing essential to the plot happened, we can effectively skip over it.

In a LARP, FTB can be used to save time. For instance, in **MET: VTM**, player-characters may wish to travel a long distance. They race to their Scooby van, dive in, and they're off to adventure. It's elementary that the Storyteller need not play out every second of this interlude unless it's important. Use *Fade to Black* and return to the scene as they stand in front of a creepy warehouse where enemy Sabbat are hiding out. Perfect! The Storyteller can get to the action without wasting a lot of time describing every minute step of the journey.


However, there are times when Storytellers must be cautious while using FTB exactly as it is used in film. Consider the horror genre: Nearly everyone has seen a movie where the monster is kept in the shadows, where there is a closed door with something terrible behind it, where that thing is, in effect, in the dark, unknown, unrevealed. In such a movie, the audience may see a young girl in a darkened park, hear a growl, then see a flash of teeth, hear a scream, and she falls. Then from off-screen, the audience hears the visceral crunch of flesh and crack of bone—immediately, their minds go to their wildest imaginings. By fading to black, the film director engages the unknown to increase tension and a sense of horror.

When running similar scenes, Storytellers must be careful when using FTB. A live storytelling experience is not 100 percent identical to watching a distanced visual medium like film. Because we embody our player-characters (PCs) in **MET**, feelings can run high, and emotionally charged scenes can be potentially triggering. In the above example, FTB's inherent mystery is meant to make a scene darker or harder emotionally. In **MET**, Storytellers take care to make their players feel safe and supported. Ideally, storytelling techniques enhance trust between players and Storyteller staff. Using FTB to increase tension during an already-tense scene can erode player trust and cause excess bleed and out-of-character (OOC) issues.

Enhancing Horror with Fade to Black

So how do we make use of FTB to make a scene dark and intense? How do we, in essence, torture a character but not its player? It's all about placement. Storytellers can alter the technique slightly by putting a FTB in the middle of the action instead of at the end. For example, the intrepid band of werewolf Cubs mentioned above might be ambushed and captured by a pack of Black Spiral Dancers. The PCs are helpless as their captors enter the room, bloody weapons of torture in their hands. They hear only the screams of their friends as they are tortured...and then you *Fade to Black*.

During this interlude, time passes, but the FTB doesn't signal the end of the game session, like in the horror-



movie example above. Instead, we come up on a new scene just as the PCs, battered and against all odds, escape. By engaging each player's imagination of what "Black Spiral Dancer" torture looks like without getting into gory detail and graphic description. Then by showing the heroic aftermath, you've provided a tense scene, and then you've relieved that tension. That relief is key. The PCs' story goes on. Who knows what tortures they endured, only to heroically escape and take revenge? Galliards will sing about it for ages—leaving those Galliard PCs license to get involved in story too.

Challenges when Using Fade to Black

Of course, there are instances when using FTB is problematic. Consider the instance of violent character death—a character fights valiantly but is overcome. The Storyteller describes an image of a rival swinging a bloody mallet at the PC's head, and then...the Storyteller calls for a FTB, leaving the characters in figurative darkness—a place where anything can happen.

The PC's death is not the only problem for the player—it's also the absence of closure—not knowing what happened before, during, or after the PC's death. Anything could happen in those moments. The PC could be killed, dismembered, sold for parts, or built into a robot body. For many female players in particular, the fear remains that the PC could be raped or other depravities visited upon the body. It's no wonder that such scenes can be potentially triggering and enhance bleed. While FTB enhances tension and provides a good story, responsible participants in MET put the safety and well-being of players ahead of even good story.

In this instance, where a narrow interpretation of FTB proves more hindrance than help, it can be useful to seek alternate ways to use this technique—specifically to de-escalate tension and provide closure.

Alternative Uses of Fade to Black

Shared Narrative

A *Shared Narrative* uses FTB to focus on closure before the end of a scene. This technique is best used when both players have a serious emotional stake in the scene's outcome and normally when one player either has gotten, or stands to get, her victory condition over another—for instance, in the case where one PC wants to visit a horrific death on another PC.

Some players call this technique "Mediation," but I don't prefer this term. Mediation infers rules, and to many people, "rules" means "challenges." Instead, place the focus on the story as a *Shared Narrative*: a story that both the dominant player and the non-dominant player control and tell together—a shared story that preserves the victory condition, but also allows the non-dominant player to have the closure that is so often lacking in PC death scenes.

Applying the *Shared Narrative* takes trust, and setting expectations is key to fostering that trust. For example, expectations should be set that the announced victory condition—character death, loss of resources, etc.—cannot be changed. However, allowances should be made for the non-dominant PC to "go out in style" before the scene goes dark. For a character in a death scene, dramatic death could mean the PC having the chance to soliloquy before it dies, getting in a final shot before going down, or even harming the other PC's person or resources. Such details pay homage to the dying character as a rival and opponent, and let its player close out the story respectfully. Allowing the non-dominant player to narrate a large part of the PC's death not only shows good sportsmanship, but it also lessens tension, bleed, and emotional reactions.

One-Sentence Summation

A second variation on FTB, the *One-Sentence Summation*, focuses on immediate, unemotional closure before the fade. This technique is best used when a player becomes or has the capacity to become too emotional for the scene to continue. Once again, the scene provides closure and preserves the dominant PC's victory condition, but it does so in a factual, straightforward way. Instead of increasing the scene's tension by using FTB, the players and Storyteller work together to create a simple, neutral statement that sums up the PC's plight. For example, the Storyteller might state, "In a pitched battle, Billie X kills Danny D." This description is cut and dry, with no embellishment. There is no question of what happened, no ambiguity, and yet it is emotionless, not a judgment call. It provides a simple statement of fact before the lights go down on the scene.

Vignettes

The third variation, the *Vignette*, is not strictly a variation of FTB, but FTB is a film technique and is often paired with a vignette at the end of a movie. Much like in Westerns where the heroes ride off into the sunset, a *Vignette* describes a final scene that provides a bookend for a character's story. This scene could be a retelling of an epic victory in flashback, where we see the PC in its prime. It could be as simple as noting that the PC's loved ones spread her ashes on its mortal family's grave. A

Vignette can take the form of a narrated memory of a PC's political or artistic triumph or offer a glimpse of the work it has left behind as a reminder of its lasting effect on the world. A Vignette can be narrated by a Storyteller or the non-dominant player. It is meant to be a fictional bookend, an assertion that the PC lives on, if only in the memories of those left behind. While fictional, a Vignette provides closure in a very real way, by letting the player see a PC's closing image before the final Fade to Black.

Fade to Black as a film technique has many and various uses that can be echoed in **MET**. However, since the medium of a LARP constantly changes and is unscripted, unlike a movie, Storytellers need techniques for altering the technique in order to use it effectively. A movie is not a shared narrative; it's a slice of action we consume from a safe distance. But LARP is a living, breathing, collaborative creation. As such, it deserves alternative FTB techniques that are fluid, open to assessment, and geared toward player safety and well-being.

Biography

Genevieve Iseult Eldredge (GIE) writes LGBTQ Young Adult (YA) fiction because, as a young adult, she never had any lesbian heroes like her.

In her lesbian YA series, *Circuit Fae*, she brings together her love of LGBTQ literature, urban fantasy, young adult fiction, and the secret world of the Fae—so that young adults of the LGBTQ community can have heroes that understand, think and act, and live and love like them.

GIE is an MFA grad, a martial artist, a self-rescuing princess, and all-around strong female character. She's multi-published, and in her role as an editor, she has helped hundreds of authors make their dream of being published a reality.

GIE believes in fairies (in fact, she's clapping right now), true love (not "to blave"), and championing the often-unheard female voice. She might be using D&D figures to plot out an epic fight scene right now.



OK CHECK-IN TECHNIQUE

By Maury Brown and Johanna Koljonen

Live-action Roleplaying (LARP) games around the world are becoming far more immersive, often asking players to delve into subjects that ask them to stretch their limits of comfort and put themselves in the mindsets of characters who are undergoing tortuous conditions—whether of mind, body or soul. **In Mind's Eye Theatre (MET): Vampire The Masquerade** and **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** games, the characters are frequently monsters, subjecting themselves and others to their inhumane natures. Knowing this, how do Storytellers and players assess each other to ensure that the experience, while immersive, does not damage the player or the game?

The *OK Check-In technique* is a safety procedure gaining traction in LARP communities, including the MET community. It provides a formalized way for participants to discreetly check in with each other during roleplay to ensure their fellow players are doing well, even if their characters are visibly suffering. This proactive mechanic encourages all players to share responsibility for each other's well-being, and it facilitates player-to-player communication without causing long pauses in roleplay.

Players in distress are often too overwhelmed, embarrassed, or afraid to risk reaching to another player. These same players may also think their fellow participants are able to sense when their difficulty is real, rather than a part of gameplay. Even when it is entirely clear from the situation that a character's emotions or pain belong inside the fiction, players who experience powerful roleplay together may want to check in with each other during and after a scene. The OK Check-In method allows these players to easily communicate, even when upset, so much so that the inability to answer should be viewed as a sign of a possible real-life emergency.

In many MET systems, it is possible to step out-of-character for a few seconds and ask if another player is okay. However, that's not true in all games, and it's not always encouraged, as it breaks the flow of the story. The OK Check-In provides a means to assess an intense situation without interrupting the game. If the other player is okay, the person asking will be relieved of worry and will know they can continue their current line of roleplay. If another player does need the check in to help ensure comfort, the person asking will have the opportunity to remove the uncomfortable player from a tricky situation and create a safe LARP environment to explore darker themes.

The Function of the OK Check-In

The OK Check-In performs several functions in a game's safety culture:

- It demonstrates that the game adheres to the fundamental concept that players are separate from characters, that humans are more important than games, and that humans all deserve to not suffer if it can be avoided.
- It shows commitment to building a game culture that does not make players miserable, and it may even transform a dysfunctional game into one that's healthy. The more important dark themes are to your game, the more design effort you should put into separating the emotional and physical experiences of the characters from that of the players.
- It provides players who desire to tell intense and dark stories a means to calibrate their experiences with each other. While the primary reason for checking in is to make sure another player is not injured, in shock, heartbroken, or triggered by prior trauma, it also reassures the person who asked. It ensures everyone can be as comfortable as possible and focus on the game, without creating harmful situations.
- It encourages self-care. Commonly, humans sometimes aren't great at taking stock of their situation when they are roleplaying in a heightened state of emotions. When one player asks others if they are okay, everyone is forced to ask themselves the same question in order to answer. If the answer is not a resounding yes, then everyone should take a moment to consider the current situation and their feelings about it.
- It enables intense and immersive roleplay. When everyone is comfortable with their level of emotional and physical involvement in the game, they are able to focus their attention on roleplay.

The Missing Player

While some LARPS are incredibly flexible and can adjust their direction immediately after a participant's departure, players and Storytellers in other MET LARPs may feel as though this absence interrupts the game. Preparing for this possibility before game begins, and having a comfortable

exit for the player prepared in advance, is a necessity. If we want to tell dark stories, we need to create a community of players who trust each other. A person is more important than a story, and if a distressed player is always treated with dignity, the collective playerbase can rest easy in the knowledge that they, too, will be cared for if the need arises.

Using the OK Check-In Technique

When Storytellers opt to begin employing the OK Check-In technique, the most important design choice they need to make is how the procedure will best work in their games. Variations of this technique may be used in order to ensure everyone is able to use it when needed. However, in all variations, this mechanic will only work if it is actively encouraged and practiced before a LARP session begins.

All players must practice the gestures and words multiple times before play begins, or they risk not being able to recall them in times of distress or discomfort. In addition, establish a safe word that halts all roleplaying. This practice makes for a good pre-game icebreaking technique.

While practicing these procedures may feel silly, no LARP safety mechanic should be spoken about in a campy way, especially during its introduction. They are not optional. They are not uncool. Undermining them also undermines the trust between your players.

The Technique

The OK Check-In technique typically follows these steps:

1. Player 1 flashes the “OK” symbol with her hand—with her thumb and index finger touching in an “o” shape and the other three fingers extended upward—to another player and establishes eye contact. This gesture means, “Are you okay?”
2. Player 2 responds to the signal in one of three ways:
 - With a thumbs-up hand gesture, which means, “Doing fine. No need for follow-up.”
 - With a thumbs-down gesture, which means, “I am not okay.” Player 1 should respond by taking the player aside and saying the agreed-upon statements (see below).
 - With a flat hand gesture, which means, “I am not sure.” Player 1 should still respond by taking the player aside and saying the agreed-upon response (see below).

Creating Safe Spaces

Each LARP game should appoint a person who assists players who indicate that they are not “doing fine.”

In addition, the game community should codify the appropriate responses to the thumbs-down and flat-hand gestures. Storytellers should also ensure all players know who their assigned check-in person is. Players should also be aware of the appropriate responses to the gestures, so the full responsibility of dealing with a difficult situation does not fall solely on the shoulders of someone who may lack the experience or skills to assist a player who indicates they are not okay.

For example, in the U.S. magical college LARP *New World Magischola*, a player will take the distressed person to a counselor—a member of the staff tasked with the emotional safety of participants. At the Nordic LARP *End of the Line*, the recommended script is, “Can I walk you to the off-game room?” This space acts as a sanctuary, staffed by an organizer skilled with listening. In both of these situations, the staff member is also empowered to take action if another player causes distress, whether intentionally or unintentionally, or otherwise inflicting harm on others.

If your game does not have the manpower to assign a dedicated staff member to these situations, it may make sense to recruit players and provide them additional training to assist in such instances. Also consider taking distressed players to a Storyteller. However, if a Storyteller is involved in the upsetting situation, providing an option between the staff member or an assigned player allows the distressed person to make a safe choice, whether based on gender or other considerations.

Designated Safe Area

In almost any space, it should be possible to offer at least a few chairs in a corner or an adjoining room that are designated as out-of-character spaces, intended for players who need a moment to gather their thoughts. Then, the player who offered the OK Check-In gesture, or an appropriate staff member, can offer to walk the person to the out-of-character space and ask to sit with them. Allowing players to step out of character while still seeing events unfold encourages self-care and provides the staff with important visual cues regarding the intensity of the story. Organizers can also check this area to verify if anyone needs additional support.

During this process, it is important to establish that no one should pressure the distressed person to talk about the reasons why they needed time. While wanting to help is natural, this dialogue may increase the anxiety the person may be feeling. If there is no immediate problem to solve or urgent medical situation, then allow the person to speak on their own time. Distressed players do not have to justify their lack of comfort. Assistants can communicate that they are willing to listen, but they should also offer other

choices, like finding the person's friends or a Storyteller.

In situations where a player is unresponsive or incoherent when the check-in is performed, this situation should be treated as a medical emergency. Furthermore, while small injuries like a paper cut can be handled by taking a person to the safe space, other injuries may also require emergency treatment. The game should be immediately stopped for all players using a previously established safe phrase, such as "Stop the LARP: medical emergency."

The Flat-Hand Option

Some players believe that the flat-hand signal is redundant and unneeded, since it triggers the same response as a "thumbs-down" signal. The three-tiered response is designed to remove difficulties presented by socialization—particularly among women or other marginalized groups—and help them seek assistance. Too many people "power through" and state they are fine, so as not to appear weak or subject themselves to retaliation. The flat-hand option allows people to show their mindset in difficult scenes, without having to make the self-determination that they are "not that bad."

Additional Variations of the OK Check-In Technique

The OK Check-in technique can potentially be used in alternate ways, often naturally evolving out of the basic system. These additional gestures should not be used alone—they should be introduced in addition to the basic system.

- *Proactive Thumbs-Up:* Players can make a proactive "thumbs-up" gesture to other players as they enter a scene, letting others know they are OK and don't need additional check-ins. This gesture is especially useful in larger games where heated situations may already exist.
- *Proactive Thumbs-Down:* Players may give the "thumbs-down" gesture unprompted, indicating to another player that they need assistance out-of-character. The recipient should respond with the agreed-upon script and take them to a safe area.
- *Enthusiastic Thumbs-Up:* Player can use a "double-thumbs-up" gesture or a huge smile and thumbs-up to indicate "Yes, please, more of this." This gesture can be used discreetly in the middle of a scene to escalate it at the consent of the other player or to show appreciation.
- *Thumbs-Down to the Photographer:* Players who do not wish to be photographed in a particular scene can give the "thumbs-down" gesture, instructing a photographer to exit the area.

Conclusion

Both *Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade* and *MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse* games are ripe with opportunities to explore dark themes with dramatic consequences. The subjects can be exhilarating for characters, but also can cause players distress as they confront volatile emotional topics. The OK Check-in method provides an easy and structured way to take the pulse of a situation and show players that their environment is a safe and nurturing place to examine these topics.

Biography

Maury Brown is the CEO of Learn Larp, LLC. She created the OK Check-In technique as described in this article and it was used for the first time with the four runs of her LARP, *New World Magischola*, in 2016.

Johanna Koljonen is the CEO of Participation Design Agency and consults with White Wolf. She is the co-producer of *End of the Line*, a LARP in the V:tM universe that introduced the OK Check-In technique at its New Orleans run 2016.

Koljonen and Brown have presented together and separately on safety and calibration inLARPs at various conferences and conventions worldwide.



CULLING THE HERD

Keeping a Community Healthy

By Kim Hosmer

In an ideal world, everyone in your **Mind's Eye Theatre (MET)** live-action roleplaying game (LARP) will get along promoting the fun gameplay of others as well as themselves. Unfortunately, you will run into individuals who seem to have the sole intent of inflicting as much emotional or physical trauma on other players as possible, without their consent. Such participants manipulate others and use emotional deceit to cover up their misdeeds. They may be “drama llamas” who point fingers at everyone else when confronted with an issue, or they might be players who throw histrionics when a ruling doesn’t go their way.

A Missing Stair

The **Mind's Eye Theater** community calls this issue a “missing stair:” a problem that exists and yet is never fixed, as everyone learns to work their way around that person or issue. Carefully note: someone who is a little fond of “rules lawyering” is a far cry from someone who sets out to hurt other players and staff. A missing-stair player is someone who does not respect others’ boundaries or the game’s setting—they are simply out for themselves.

It is important to identify players who are detrimental to your game, because word-of-mouth can make or break your **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP. Unresolved conflict can prevent new players from attending, and it might also cause you to lose existing ones as the tension continues to build. As this situation escalates, it can lead to complaints of cliqueism, and players may bad-mouth your game, because they believe only the “in people” can play.

Fixing the Stair

In a case where a missing-stair player knows full well what she is doing but chooses to do it anyway, it is better to follow your **Mind's Eye Theatre** organization’s disciplinary procedures, which will likely result in the player’s removal, but not all missing stairs need to be removed. In many cases, their behavior may be the result of player inexperience or lack of recognition of the problem, and they may not be motivated by malice or ill-intent. If such a person is ignored or avoided, then that player may be unhappy as they now feel excluded, and the other players may also feel

uncomfortable, because they now think they have to deal with a problem that no one wants to address—leaving no one comfortable.

Codes of Conduct

Preventatively, an easy way to stop missing stairs in their tracks is to set clear expectations for your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game that address such problems before they start. Your *code of conduct* should include guidelines for acceptable and respectful behavior for both staff and participants, and these guidelines should encompass both in- and out-of-character situations. Storytellers should not be exempt from this code of conduct, as an attitude of disdain or contempt can cause players to quickly disregard the rules. A monkey-see, monkey-do pattern evolves through communities, not just **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARPs. If the leadership exhibits poor behavior, the rest of the participants quickly follow.

Early Intervention

Storytellers keep an eye out for out for players not having fun or floundering and try to correct that as quickly as possible. The same urgency should be shown when you see behavior that can escalate into greater issues. By having a talk with an individual early on, when you catch misconduct, you can nip these problems in the bud, before they have a chance to grow into something larger. To borrow from a well-known slogan, “if you see something, say something.”

However, give the disciplined player the benefit of the doubt, as some players may not realize exactly how their conduct affects others. If the missing-stair player is acting out of malice or a deliberate desire to mistreat fellow players, she will know, after your conversation, that you will not tolerate this behavior in your game. Good people sometimes still act up, if they believe their actions have no repercussions and are not noticed. Make clear to them that they are seen, and that your **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP organization does not shirk from confrontation and enacting disciplinary action.

Example: *You see Roger, a player in your **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** game, getting his “rage on” by intruding into the*

personal space of his fellow players without asking consent and, in some cases, grabbing them. Roger believes he's just playing the character, but Susie, Jenny, and Phil feel like he's literally about to attack them. In this situation, the Storyteller should step in and have a talk with Roger, letting him know that while his enthusiasm is appreciated, he needs to remember to always ask for consent before touching or getting that close to another player.

Managing Cliques

Cliques naturally form in all communities, including LARP, and players will eventually come to informally lead these groups. You should recognize and keep in touch with these individuals, as they can be very influential in swaying opinions and changing behaviors within your **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP. Typically, they will also know about misconduct issues before you know about them and, in some cases, may be the source of them. Working with these pacesetters and keeping a clear line of communication is essential. When they mention problems to you, face them head-on to come to the best resolution possible. Handling these issues before they become serious is an excellent way to keep the morale of your game high, ensuring your players are aware their organizers take their concerns seriously.

Staying Neutral

It can be hard to avoid having your own feelings hurt when your work is criticized by one of your game's informal leaders. Remember, in most cases, these players have almost as much investment in your game as you do. Their support is necessary to keep your game and community thriving and strong, and investing the time and energy into maintaining relationships and lines of communication will pay off in the long-term. Creating unnecessary rivalries will hurt your game; try to see these players as chieftains of their tribes, allies who will do some of the work to stop misconduct before it starts and raising concerns.

Example: In your **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** game, Phil leads a large pack of ten Garou and a couple of Fera. You notice that some of the players in his pack have stopped showing up to games, and you mention this observation to him. He informs you that they have felt that their characters have been targeted by some of the other players due to personal grudges, and he gives you some specific examples. With Phil's help you now have the opportunity to mediate the situation.

Setting the Standard

While these informal leaders can provide players with a lot of guidance, game staff also needs to make sure they are setting a good example. Using emotional manipulation, such as by stating that you are an unpaid volunteer,

weakens your stance as a leader. It may seem unfair, but you will be held to a higher standard than anyone else in your game. If you are discourteous, rude, or harass players, your players will believe this behavior is acceptable for everyone. Again, you need to follow the expectations you initially set for your entire game.

Using the Interest-Based Relational Approach

Sometimes you can see warning signs before problems happen in your **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP. Such signals could include: conflict that has persisted over a long period of time, issues that recur on a regular basis, personal attacks made on others, tense and uncomfortable games or social events, deadlocked discussion, and loss of players. Instead of making accusations or pointing blame, you can employ a conflict resolution technique called the *Interest-Based Relational Approach*. This technique respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position. This method involves separating people and their emotions from the problem, building mutual respect and understanding, and forming cooperative resolutions to conflict. The Interest-Based Relational Approach focuses on consent, courtesy, and helping both sides understand each other's position.

Use active listening techniques, such as looking at the speaker, nodding, allowing the other person to finish before talking, and asking clarifying questions—these practices are essential to this process. Avoid placing blame and showing strong emotion throughout the discussion, and focus on “I” statements rather than “you.” Once all the facts have been presented, participants should work cooperatively to seek solutions. Focus on the problem, not the people. Maintaining good relationships is your priority, even if this goal means that, at the end of the discussion, the only resolution reached is to treat everyone else with civility. Civility means acting with politeness, without rude remarks, gossip, eye-rolling, or plans for retaliation.

Example: In your **Vampire: The Masquerade** LARP, Jenny has been getting increasingly more snappy with Trish at your socials, to the point of rudeness. Jenny also goes out of her way to target Trish's character with in-character actions, even when they don't make sense. You sit both of them down and discover, through the fact-finding process, that Trish is now dating Jenny's ex-partner, and Jenny is lashing out about it. Trish states she wasn't trying to hurt Jenny, but she's not breaking up with her partner, either. They resolve to minimize in-character interactions, and Jenny agrees to stop bringing personal vendettas into game. Trish states she will refrain from public displays of affection at social events. Neither one wants to be friends, but they will stop acting out against each other.

Player Feedback

If your LARP organization is small, it's nearly impossible to police every single one of your players. No matter the size of your game's staff, it is still useful to allow your players to give anonymous feedback, suggestions, and complaints. Some players may be concerned that such a system allows others to cast accusations without evidence to support them. Be ready to assure these players that an anonymous allegation isn't cause to remove a player from the game.

If you receive multiple complaints about the same player, however, it may be time to investigate the complaints further. Many people hesitate to confront others or state their concerns plainly, for fear of repercussions. Our community should not be scared to voice its thoughts, but in some cases, your fear of retaliation will cause many players to hold their tongues.

How many players have heard a terrible rumor about someone and, when asked if the speaker attempted to bring the problem to the attention of the Storytellers, she responded by stating that the individual was so popular/powerful that the speaker feared she would get in trouble if she voiced her concerns? Imagine how such a scenario might change if the Storyteller had simply known to keep an eye on this problem person, thanks to anonymous comments, and then directly observed misconduct.

Storytellers must be watchful of their own prejudices or opinions of friends and fellow players. Take complaints seriously; do not dismiss them just because you have a personal relationship with a given player. Anyone can be fooled.

Example: In your *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* game, you receive anonymous complaints stating that Parker is cheating during challenges by waiting a split second before throwing rock-paper-scissors. Players also claim that Parker's character's stats vary, dependent on the game, in ways that make no sense. You start observing his challenges and directly observe that the claim is correct. You speak to Parker and state that, although he may not be aware of it, you've noticed his actions. Proactively, you suggest that he might want to switch to using cards, or some other method, to randomize challenges. You avoid accusing him of cheating, but he now knows his challenges are being observed.

Handling Emergency Situations

So what should you do when someone crosses the line completely? If their misconduct crosses a legal boundary, this situation is beyond your authority as a **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP Storyteller, and you should contact the appropriate local law enforcement. Your priority should be to protect the victim(s). If players present a threat to others, they should not be allowed at games or any other

event your organization hosts until the situation has been resolved to the satisfaction of the injured parties. If someone physically or sexually assaults another individual, they should not be allowed to endanger others at any future event, for the security of your troupe. LARP is not a court of law, and if you believe someone presents a hazard to others, you have the responsibility to make the best judgment call possible for the health of your players. Allowing a potentially dangerous person to continue playing places your organization and the other players at risk. This situation is when repercussions for breaking laws, violating codes of conduct, and shattering the community's trust, take effect. Accurate documentation, such as detailed notes, statements from other players, and screen captures will help you navigate such emergency situations.

In such a circumstance, many players may start making excuses for the disciplined person, stating how unfair it is that said player loses her fun time. They may claim that the individual in question was going through a rough spot, lost their temper, and hit someone, or they may say that "poor" so-and-so was drunk or high and didn't comprehend how inappropriate and aggressive they were being. We want to believe the best of our fellow human beings, and while that tendency is admirable, others could be have their dignity or body violated if the person continues to have opportunities to behave inappropriately.

Example: In your *Vampire: The Masquerade* game, Jared and Brad get into a heated argument in-character, and Jared snaps and starts physically assaulting Brad. People separate them, law enforcement is called, and medical assistance is provided if needed. Jared is suspended from attending games while your organization's leadership reviews the events that occurred and makes a final determination about whether or not Jared will be allowed to return.

As a Storyteller or leader of your **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP organization, you will have to learn not to avoid conflict. Inappropriate conduct rarely resolves on its own, and it's not uncommon for a minor incident to explode because it was ignored in the hope that it would be forgotten. Be proactive in making sure your game provides a safe and pleasant environment for the majority of players. Recognizing when an incident occurs, and addressing it immediately is essential. You may have to reconcile yourself to the fact that to some players, you are going to be perceived as "the bad guy." If the cost of having a fun, safe, and thriving **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP is having a couple of people mad at you, then that is a success.

No person has a right to play at a game, no more than they have an obligation to play in one. LARP is not an inalienable right for all mankind. Not all games will be a good fit for all people, and if you cannot trust a player to

respect her fellow participants, your game is best-served to exclude her. This fact can be a hard pill to swallow, as geek culture is built on inclusion. Keep in mind that you are doing your players and staff a kindness by fixing conduct issues. In the same way that no one wants to live in a house full of missing stairs, no one wants to play in a game full of them, either.

Biography

Kim Hosmer has been gaming and freelance writing for more than twenty years. She has previously contributed to work on the *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG and *Swashbuckling Adventures* lines published by AEG. Kim lead the team that wrote and staged AEG's L5R LARPs at Gencon from 2002-2005, some of the most largely attended LARPs Gencon had seen at that time. Recently, she has dived back into her early love of the **World of Darkness**. She can often be found involved with LARPs in that setting, though now as a player.



CARE AND COMMUNITY IN COMPETITIVE PLAY:

Negotiation Tools for MET Chronicles

By Maria Cambone

The best stories happen when **Mind's Eye Theatre (MET)** players take significant risks in game. By attempting coups against powerful in-character leaders, revealing secrets about others' characters or about their own, or going against a faction's social mores in pursuit of a taboo agenda, players drive the action of each other's stories and create an atmosphere of suspense and wonder that brings the **World of Darkness** to life. Yet players can be discouraged from taking risks if the potential for in- or out-of-character fallout greatly outweighs the benefits they might achieve. As much as players and storytellers carefully scheme to ensure the success of a LARP, most give equal or greater consideration to how bold strokes in-character might impact their out-of-character sense of happiness, security, and community.

Recognizing this hesitation, Storytellers and players can encourage one another to take incredible in-character risks that heighten the experience of play by implementing two tools that mitigate players' out-of-character concerns: *consent negotiation* and *tapping out*. At a basic level, these tools set expectations and facilitate communication between participants without requiring them to interrupt the flow of a scene. When integrated into a community's culture, these tools build trust between participants, and they help Storytellers share the work of creating of an immersive, exciting, and satisfying game between all participants.

Consent Negotiation

In MET games, participants may portray characters that are disturbing, violent, or evil. Some enjoy playing abominable fiends with anyone in the community. Others exclusively enjoy portraying taboo behaviors only with people they know well, or only using particular types of dark content. Finally, some prefer not to imagine the depravities that others create. To complicate things, participants' roleplaying preferences can change, even within a single game session. Engaging in an MET game from any of these perspectives is a valid way to play; however, not all play styles will mesh well. Naturally, the best way to ensure

your fellow players continue to have a great time, no matter their play preferences, is by communicating with one another.

How to Negotiate Consent

Consent negotiation facilitates communication between participants without significantly interrupting an ongoing scene. To use this technique, when one participant wants to roleplay aggression, flirtation, or violence with another, the person initiating the action should pause before beginning to address the intended recipient of her action. Using the Out-of-Character hand gesture, she prompts the other player with a verbal cue, such as "off game," before asking for permission to initiate the action.

Participants should always initiate a consent negotiation before initiating scenes including *physical role-play*, *sexuality*, and *violence*. When playing vampire characters, participants should also initiate consent negotiations before roleplaying *feeding* upon or with another player's character. Of course, participants may be more specific when describing their desired actions, such as by asking, "Out-of-character: may I touch your hair?"

Participants should only respond to a consent negotiation request in one of two ways: "Yes, please," or "No, thank you." These limited responses prevent a consent negotiation from interrupting the flow of a scene. If a participant is not sure if she wants to participate in the described roleplay, she should say "No, thank you." After all, she can always change her mind.

Whether a participant accepts or rejects a consent negotiation, the player who initiated the negotiation should respond, "Understood, thank you," expressing gratitude to the player for setting and communicating boundaries. This response ends the negotiation. Participants should not ask anyone for an explanation or push the issue. Especially in the heat of the moment, participants can forget this recommendation. If further discussion occurs, others should remind the inquiring participant that their recipient, in fact, is obliged *not* to give an explanation. By requiring participants to avoid explaining why they agree or decline, Storytellers and players can avoid having to justify

their discomfort. Their preferences cannot be dismissed as immature or invalid. Other participants should never determine whether a particular scenario is too dark for another individual to roleplay; it is always that individual's own choice.

Players should use this tool regularly, even with people they know well and with whom they roleplay often. This practice ensures that participants make a habit of using the tool with everyone within the game's community. Showing this care for one another, even in competitive play, demonstrates that mutual enjoyment of playing the game together is more important than winning or losing the game itself.

Example of Negotiating Consent

*Kiaya, Gabriella, and Antwon are playing **Vampire: The Masquerade**. Kiaya is storytelling for Gabriella and Antwon. Ensnared by a Setite priestess, their characters, Camarilla neonates, must find a way to escape the NPC's clutches without revealing who sent them to investigate her. As he portrays his character, Antwon sidles up to Kiaya, who is portraying the Setite NPC. He crosses his fingers in the out-of-character sign and pauses to initiate a consent negotiation. He asks, "Out-of-character: arm around waist?"*

Kiaya considers his question. Even though she and Antwon have roleplayed together before and they are on good terms, she declines. "No, thank you."

Perplexed and suspicious, Antwon challenges, "Why not?" Could Kiaya suspect his true motive: to establish a grapple on her NPC, allowing Gabriella's character to make a break for safety?

Gabriella interjects. Making the out-of-character hand gesture, she reminds Antwon, "Let's resolve it in-character." Gabriella is right; Kiaya's reason for declining to participate in physical roleplay with Antwon is not up for discussion, especially in the middle of a scene.

Antwon realizes that he's let the tension of the moment get to him. "Understood. Thank you," he tells his companions. Together, they return to the in-character action.

Tapping Out

Even when participants check in with one another and negotiate consent, scenes can take unexpected turns. Sometimes this change is exciting, but sometimes, a surprise is unwelcome. A player can use the tapping out technique to signal that a scene has escalated beyond the boundaries of her out-of-character sense of respect or well-being.

How to Use Tapping Out

To use this tool, a player reaches across her chest with her right hand and firmly taps her left shoulder three times.

This gesture should be audible to the participants in her immediate vicinity. If the player is in close quarters with another participant, or if the game site is too dark for her to be seen clearly, she may also tap an object near her. She repeats the gesture until she has the attention of her companions.

When someone taps out, those in her immediate vicinity should fall silent and stop what they are doing. If there is shouting, pause; if the player who tapped out is crowded or her exit is impeded, stand back. During this pause, participants should not ask what is wrong; they should focus on creating space for the person who tapped out to take care of her own needs without significant disruption to the scene.

Meanwhile, the person who tapped out can choose from two options: she may exit the game space, or she may stay. If she leaves, she must be allowed to depart with no questions asked. It's useful to have an out-of-character space set aside for participants to go to when they exit. If the player or Storyteller chooses to stay, she should initiate a short verbal negotiation to inform the other participants how they can adjust the scene's darkness or physicality so that it is fun for her again. Thereafter, the scene continues, incorporating the changes.

As with negotiating consent, when a participant taps out, no one should ask her why, and she should not explain why she tapped out. Instead, other participants should ask, "How can we adjust this scene?" This focus frees the player who tapped out to offer suggestions for her out-of-game sense of security without saying why she has that preference.

Before implementing tapping out in a game or chronicle, Storytellers should decide what happens to a player's character when she taps out and leaves a scene. Does the character remain present while the player is absent? Does the scene pause indefinitely, and if so, should the other players involved in it wait to resume or disperse? Storytellers should make this decision based on the needs of their individual chronicles or particular scenes and ensure that they communicate their reasoning clearly with all players.

Example of Tapping Out

*Gabriel and Cameron are playing **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. Gabriel portrays Wind-in-Stone, a Lupus Red Talon, while Cameron portrays Hydrant Sniffer, a Homid Cub.*

After observing that Hydrant Sniffer lacks what he considers proper lupine instincts, Wind-in-Stone has begun to verbally disparage him. Gabriel and Cameron previously agreed that roleplaying this hazing was fun for both of them; however, when Wind-In-Stone begins calling Hydrant Sniffer a "bitch," Cameron realizes that Gabriel has accidentally crossed an out-of-character line.

The next time Wind-In-Stone calls Hydrant Sniffer a bitch,

Cameron taps his left shoulder three times, signaling that he is tapping out. Gabriel falls silent, pausing to let Cameron leave the scene if necessary. Cameron tells him, "I'd like to keep going."

Gabriel asks, "How can we adjust this scene so it's more fun?"

"Could you think of another way to insult my character without calling him a bitch?" Cameron suggests.

"Of course." From then on, Wind-in-Stone disparages Hydrant Sniffer as nothing but a snack for a Black Spiral Dancer. Other characters do not comment on this change, as the matter was settled for out-of-character reasons.

Application to Competitive Play

The purpose of LARP is to participate in a community by playing a game together. Conflict between characters is fundamental to playing MET games. Players enjoy competing with one another for position, power, and prestige, and sometimes, a player can only attain her character's goals at the expense of another player-character. So how can Storytellers incorporate these tools into their chronicles without dulling the excitement of competitive play?

Workshopping

In order to successfully implement these tools, a baseline level of trust must first be established between participants among the community. Storytellers and veteran players can foster trust and willingness to experiment within their gaming groups by leading workshops about these tools and techniques. These workshops can take place as frequently as necessary: before each game session begins, once per quarter, or every time a new player is brought into the game. Although the following example focuses on how to implement a workshop before a game begins, it may be more practical for some games to run workshops online via video chats or to use a group dinner before game to workshop the tools discussed in this essay.

If Storytellers and veteran players want to workshop these techniques directly before a game begins as a way for participants to get into character, they should ideally have a workshop space that is separate from, but adjacent to, the game space. Begin by guiding players through a series of facial expressions: fury, grief, and terror. Have players walk around the workshop space as they watch one another embodying each expression. Prompt them to observe how they and others express emotion differently, and to consider how to use these techniques when they see someone expressing emotion in-character differently or to a greater degree than they do in this exercise.

Next, as players wander through the room, instruct them to flirt with and complement one another without commenting on each other's bodies below the neck. "I love

all the colors in your costume – did you make it yourself?" is a great compliment, while "I can't get over how good your boobs look in that dress" is inappropriate for this exercise. This practice helps players feel comfortable with flirtation in-character and provides a baseline foundation for appropriate behavior that one might safely use when roleplaying flirtation or sexuality.

Finally, the workshop leaders should ask the participants to practice negotiating consent and tapping out in rotating pairs. For example, players can practice negotiating consent by making absurd requests of one another and saying no to those requests. In this exercise, participants should always say no instead of saying yes or no, because often, when players are unsure if their answer should be yes or no, they say yes for fear of missing out or of disappointing another. This practice also helps participants accept that they do not need to know why someone declined their request.

Workshop leaders should reach out to players who enjoy very competitive games and discuss the idea that everyone participates in LARP by consent. If current and prospective members are driven off by a community that does not prioritize trust in and care for its members, then there are fewer participants available to compete against. Despite appearances, a diminishing pool of participants is not advantageous to the success of the game or to the satisfaction of competitive players; indeed, when there are fewer people with whom they can compete, games stagnate. Storytellers and workshop leaders should encourage competitive players to consider the culture that they have developed in their chronicles, and to participate in dialogue about their visions of an ideal gaming community. Address issues of stagnation by asking questions such as, "Once a player or a group of players have achieved in-character power and success, what do they build next?" or "What do they do with their victory?" If the purpose of their victory is only to retain the power that they have accumulated, these players will find that future challenges become scarce.

Enforcement

Even if community leaders regularly host pre-game workshops to teach players how to use these and other tools to build an out-of-character culture of care, players may still abuse these tools. Storytellers and community leaders should make it clear that these techniques are not available to players so that they can avoid consequences for in-character actions. Players who misuse these tools are not only cheating by breaking the rules of the game, but they also cheat the community of the trust that is given to them.

If one player feels that another has used these tools to avoid in-character conflict to benefit her character, instead of using them to assert her personal boundaries and limits for darkness, horror, or emotional roleplay, the issue

must be adjudicated by a Storyteller, not between players. Storytellers should speak with players to understand how they used these tools, discover whether a breach of trust occurred, and decide what should happen in-character. Before implementing these tools in their chronicles, Storytellers should determine what discipline players will face if they use these tools to avoid in-character conflict to benefit their characters. If Storytellers decide that a cheating player's behavior merits discipline, then they must take care to record the incident of cheating and apply disciplinary measures consistently to ensure fairness.

Conclusion

When players engage in competitive in-character play and support one another in an out-of-character culture of respect, trust, and communication, participating in the game becomes a way to connect with a vibrant, welcoming community. By using tools like negotiating consent and tapping out, players who enjoy competition can ensure that there is always a churning pool of character-versus-

character action to keep them engaged and challenged. Eventually, this churn can erode competitive players' in-character bases of power, but it is this risk — not the security of stagnation — that keeps competitive players challenged and engaged, stoking their enthusiasm. As a result, players and storytellers can tell better stories while building better communities.

Biography

Maria Cambone studies intergroup dialogue, racial and disability justice, and educational leadership as a Masters student in the Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Miami University of Ohio. She has been a member of the U.S. mid-Atlantic LARP community since 2006, and an avid **World of Darkness** fan since her first **Vampire: The Masquerade** LARP in 2010. Maria began working with By Night Studios as the associate editor for **Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse** in December 2015.



COMBATING HARASSMENT PROACTIVELY IN LARP

By Renee Ritchie

The **World of Darkness** and **Mind's Eye Theatre** games frequently address dark themes, such as violence, sexual intimacy, physical abuse, psychological torment, and emotional manipulation. Exploring these themes can bring out problematic behavior in players who get too into the game, using the same tools their characters would employ against other characters and wielding them against players. These disruptive players may even think their edgy behavior is cool, and that they are brave to tell things like they are. In fact, their attitudes can be downright harmful to other players, and may even drive participants away from a game, as these disruptive players harass others on an out-of-character level and outside the game space.

Preventing harassment and bullying is not only the responsibility of game organizers such as Storytellers, volunteers who handle out-of-character concerns, or other facilitators, but also the entire player base of the game. By promoting an environment that encourages mutual respect for participants and safety, even players coming together to meet and play together for the first time can feel relaxed and comfortable playing their characters and creating fun experiences for one another. Fostering a positive culture can also discourage problematic player behavior, so that when it does occur, organizers can take firm action.

Basic Etiquette:

How Everyone Can Help

No matter what role you take, everyone participating in the game deserves respect. All players and game organizers are human beings with full lives and feelings, both in and out of the game space. Do your best to treat them the way you would want to be treated, if not better.

You are Responsible for Your Own Actions

If you are an adult, you are legally responsible for your own actions. Be as mindful as you can of circumstances that may affect your out-of-character behavior. For example, if you know your behavior changes significantly for the worse when you're under the influence of various substances, don't use those substances prior to game, even if you think these substances help you get into your character's mindset.

If a Player Tells You that You are Harassing Them, Believe Them

When emotions run high, especially in an immersive environment, your behavior may change, and those changes might make other players uncomfortable. You might not even realize that your actions may be perceived as harassment. Trust your fellow players to know their limits and communicate to you when your own behavior becomes problematic. If you receive a complaint, apologize and back off.

If Your Game Employs Safety Mechanics, Use Them

Different games may have procedures or policies allowing players to check the emotional well-being of other participants before continuing a scene, to slow down the pace of a scene, or to end a scene entirely due to out-of-character discomfort. These techniques are intended to keep the game fun for all involved, and using these safety procedures should never be considered an evasion. These techniques frequently have built-in caveats that prevent players from using them to avoid consequences for in-character actions.

When Possible, Prepare for Tense In-Character Situations Ahead of Time

If you know in advance that your character will be in a tense situation and which players will be involved, talk to them beforehand and ask if any particular behaviors will cause problems for the participants. If your Anarch character calls out the local Camarilla Prince for bad behavior, or your Shadow Lord initiates a Staredown with the Silver Fang Sept Leader, it can make a great story. However, if the player your character is targeting has been abused in real life, getting verbally aggressive could make the game feel unsafe for the player. You can also use a pre-scene discussion to communicate any behaviors that cause you discomfort. This dialogue will help create a better experience for all parties involved, and can even provide an opportunity to collaborate on a better story.

Know Your Limits

If you are aware that certain sensations, such as sudden loud noises or being backed into a corner, will cause you discomfort, communicate those needs early and often. While organizers and players may not be able to completely eliminate these experiences from a game, they can be aware of them and allow you time to either extricate yourself from a scene or give you fair warning before the problematic event occurs. If a player knows your needs and explicitly disregards them anyway when interacting with you, that is definitely problematic behavior.

Look Out for Your Fellow Players

If you see a situation in which a player appears to be uncomfortable in an interaction with another player and it is safe for you to do so, step in and say something to the discomfited player. Focus on their well-being—check in with the player by asking out-of-character if he or she is okay. Use any safety techniques your game employs. Although you may be witnessing excellent roleplaying as opposed to real distress, ensuring player safety is always more important than maintaining in-character immersion. If it is not safe for you to check in with the distressed player, find someone to come with you, such as another player or a Storyteller. Do not let harassment continue unchecked.

Tell Someone Who Can Help!

If you are harassed at a game, tell the organizers as soon as you can. The sooner the Storytellers know, the better they can address an uncomfortable situation, escalating their responses when necessary. If Storytellers aren't aware of a problem, they can't help correct it, especially if a situation might result in sanctions against the offending player or expulsion from the game. Asking a friend to assist you by providing moral support for this conversation can help soothe unsteady nerves caused by a recently jarring incident. If the offender is one of the organizers, tell the other Storytellers anyway. In many cases, the other organizers are unaware an incident occurred.

Provide Details

Storytellers may ask you for more details about happened problematic incident, in an effort to figure out how best to address it, especially if the organizers were not present to witness it. This request is not intended to undermine the credibility of your complaint; it allows Storytellers to better understand what happened.

Your Safety Comes First

If you feel unsafe or bullied out-of-character, you should stop the interaction, even if it occurs during an in-character scene. You have the right to speak up. You can absolutely break immersion if you as a player and a person do not feel safe when interacting with another participant

or Storyteller. If the offending player does not respect clear boundaries you've set, you are by no means obligated to accept their actions without complaint.

Setting the Tone: How Storytellers Can Help

Game organizers have additional tools and capabilities at their disposal, as their initial creative spark sets the tone for the game on both an in- and out-of-character level. By setting expectations clearly, early, and often, everyone is aware of how they should behave with each other. Storytellers should also be prepared for times when those expectations fail.

Communicate Explicit Policies Encouraging Mutual Player Respect

In an ideal situation, players will respect each other, play a game, and have fun. Establish a positive game culture early and firmly, reinforcing the behavior you want to see occur. Figure out ahead of time how you intend to handle problematic behavior, such as establishing a tiered system for offenses or a simple "three strikes and you're out" rule. Such policies may not immediately require a strict, formal structure, as smaller troupes have different needs and considerations from larger games and networked chronicles. At the very least, communicate to all players what level of attention they should expect if they come to you with a problem.

Encourage Players to Come Forward if They Have a Problem

This practice not only applies to problems that occur with fellow players, but also fellow Storytellers. No one can be fully aware of all things going on during a single game, let alone a persistent, long-term chronicle. Larger games make it more difficult for organizers to be everywhere at once and be aware of all issues that may arise. Communicate a clear method for contacting the game's staff, such as a dedicated email address or online forum.

Consider Using a Safety Technique to Help Players Communicate

This process could be as simple as encouraging players to pause scenes and ask each other how they're doing, or as complex as using hand signals, such as the OK Check-In, or specific safewords to signify a need for a pause. While methods may vary from game to game, ensure your players can recognize these safety techniques and easily communicate to each other.

Follow the Policies You Set for Your Players

If you provide your participants with a set of expectations for good behavior, you will also need to meet them. Make sure you are comfortable acting on the policies you establish, before you communicate them to the player base. Exercise your procedures with as little bias as possible. A popular player contributing a great deal to the game who commits an offense that would lead to automatic ejection should receive their punishment as promptly as a player who has caused problems in the past or committed the same offense. A player's popularity should never be an aggravating or mitigating factor when determining sanctions for misconduct.

If a Player Tells You They have been Harassed, Believe Them

Whenever possible, tell the concerned players that you believe them immediately after they tell you they have been harassed. If you need more details about an incident, reassure the concerned players that you believe them, as the information they provide will help you determine how best to handle a particular situation.

Keep Track of Behavior Trends

Problematic behavior can consist of a single egregious incident or several less-severe incidents. A problem player could easily cause issues by not explicitly breaking the rules at all, but instead by acting in a manner that just skirts the line of clearly defined bad behavior. Tools to track trends can be as simple as creating a spreadsheet to log incidents or, if using an email address for player contact, setting up a label or folder for each player. When a complaint comes in from that channel, respond to the incident, then file the communication accordingly.

Mind-Altering Substances are not a Mitigating Factor for Bad Behavior.

Some games allow drinking during the course of events; do not let drunkenness be an excuse for poor player behavior. At **Mind's Eye Theatre** games, the vast majority of players are legal adults, and thus responsible for their own actions. Depending on the attitudes of your particular group of players, consider establishing rules preventing players from participating in a game session if they arrive at or become visibly intoxicated during the course of an event.

Bad Player Behavior is not a Reflection on Your Ability to Run a Game

A rare handful of participants simply enjoy making other players uncomfortable or pushing people around out-of-

character to get their way. Their bad behavior says nothing about the quality of your game; these players may very well act the same way in any game.

Don't be Afraid to Eject Disruptive Players from Your Game

You are by no means obligated to allow problem players to keep playing in your games if they are causing the rest of the player base undue discomfort. An ejection could last for a single session due to an isolated incident or become long-term (or permanent) due to a trend of problematic behavior. Whatever the case, removing a disruptive player from your game is justified if it guarantees the safety and fun of the larger player base as a whole.

Do not Force a Player to Stay in Your Game if They Need to Leave

If a player still feels uncomfortable in your game and they wish to leave, let them go and wish them well. Even after all feasible steps have been taken to prevent or address inappropriate situations, the events such players endured may have done irreparable harm to their enjoyment of the game. Never harbor ill will towards someone who needs to step away for their own well-being.

Conclusion

The best methods for preventing harassment in games come from creating an environment that encourages player respect and actively discourages disruptive behavior. Depending on your group, other corrections may be required, such as adjustments to in-game content or encouraging the use of conduct guidelines outside the game space when players interact with each other. The players themselves are more important than the game any day, and while they are not obligated to be friends with one another, basic civility and respect is every player's right.

Biography

Renee Ritchie is a writer, editor, and avid LARPer. Her work has been neatly strewn across the **World of Darkness** and **Chronicles of Darkness** game lines, specifically **Vampire: The Masquerade Dark Ages**, **Vampire: The Requiem**, **Demon: The Descent**, and **Beast: The Primordial**. Writing is also part of her day job, where she creates and manages content for various high-tech companies. When not typing her fingers to the bone, she knits yarn and chainmail, belts out Queen at karaoke, and runs or contributes to various **World of Darkness** fan blogs such as Harpies Gonna Harp.

SILENTLY ENCOURAGING IMMERSION

By Michael Pucci

In **Mind's Eye Theatre (MET)**, *immersion* is a term used to describe how real an event feels to a participant or how connected players feel to their experiences during an event. As a concept, immersion is an immeasurable sense of experience that players and game designers use to describe how much suspension of disbelief is required to connect to or invest oneself in an environment and one's own character. If a participant needs to use a higher degree of suspension of disbelief in order to be invested in the setting and scenario, then there is a reduced sense of immersion level in the experience.

Immersion can be influenced by a number of variables introduced by setting materials, the story being created with the participants, the event space, player-to-player interactions, and the overall mindset that a participant brings into the experience. A player who isn't looking for an immersive experience is one of the most difficult people in the world for Storytellers to entertain. When it comes to creating an immersive experience, game designers should provide environments and techniques that silently encourage immersion without figuratively screaming "you should be in character" at participants.

Immersive Event Design

Before an event begins, Storytellers who strive to use all possible tools to encourage players to have an enjoyable experience should first consider the steps they are taking to encourage a higher quality of immersion. Creating an immersive space not only helps with the suspension of disbelief, but also helps foster an experience that participants will be more likely to remember and wish to have again. There are several immersive event design techniques that an event host can use while preparing for an event that will not only create positive play spaces, but will also give players unspoken direction and tools to further develop a quality immersive experience. These steps include site synergy, event disclosure, event space design, and intentional scene setting techniques.

Site Synergy

Site synergy is finding a location that has design, flow, and visual aspects that all enforce and enhance the game experience you are trying to produce. You will need to

consider both basic and story-related aspects of site synergy as you develop your event. Consider how your story and site play off of one another.

Basic aspects of site synergy include:

- Finding a place that offers privacy or a non-engaged audience that will work with your event,
- Finding a location that is affordable, and
- Finding a location available during times you want.

These qualities will ensure your game location has the presence or separation it needs for dramatic role-play without unwanted engagement, will ensure you find a site that fits within your budget, and allows for use during periods of time when your customer base is available to easily participate. While a more social and political **MET: Vampire The Masquerade** game could take place in a private back room of a bar downtown, the same could not be said for your multiple-hundred-person **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** game. With more participants, more noise, phrases, and actions occur, and non-participants may find them unacceptable. The fewer participants you have during an event, the higher the price point of your event rises (or the more restrictive your search becomes, based on finances).

However, achieving site synergy requires further consideration beyond the basics. The location you choose can either enhance or break the immersion of your game depending simply on how well the nature of the story matches the environment. Hotel rooms require massive investment in decoration to not look like hotel rooms; if you are participating in a **Mind's Eye Theatre** game that takes place in someone's home, it is going to be very difficult to make that environment feel like anything other than a game taking place in someone's home.

While budget often directly affects your site selection, as an event planner, you need to be flexible with your vision. If the only site you can find is a location that requires a vast investment in set design, props, and imagination so it fits the LARP you are running, you are creating an uphill battle for yourself. If you cannot find a location that visually matches the design, focus, and nature of the narrative of the story you are looking to tell, then you should consider adapting the story and setting of your event to match your location's strengths and weaknesses. Instead of telling the players sitting in a rental hall that they are in a mega-

technological hub that can't realistically be represented, adapt the story to make it match the space. If the site that you find for your **Vampire: The Masquerade** game happens to be in the basement of a local church, then you may be better off writing a story that revolves around corruption of faith instead of trying to force an incompatible site to match your story idea. If the site you find is a few hundred acres of woodland, your **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** game may probably be better suited focusing on the ritual, spirit, and community aspects of **Werewolf**, instead of focusing on the fight against the Wyrm.

Setting Player Expectations

Once you have a story and a site that work together to build immersion, the next step is to make sure your potential event participants are clearly informed about the focus, content, and intent of the game you are hosting. Telling your players which source materials you are using is not enough information to earn your players' investment. If you want your players to be immersed in your game, then as the game's host, you need to make sure that the advertising matches the event.

Explain in detail how you will frame your game's maturity levels, themes, and content, beyond simply saying that your game is a **Vampire** game, a **Werewolf** game, or any other type of game. As a **Mind's Eye Theatre** Storyteller, if you are hosting a game that focuses on the occult, emotional conflict, combat, political intrigue, or darker content, then it is your responsibility to provide your players with enough information to make an informed decision about their participation. This process of pre-event disclosure not only ensures your players can make decisions regarding their comfort levels, but it also ensures you will have players that actively want to participate in the style of game you are hosting. A player who knows what an event's content will be and wants to be a part of the experience as described is more likely to be invested in that event. It's only logical that a player who wants to be a part of the shared story will contribute more to the game than someone who is actively attempting to push the story focus in a different direction.

Suggested Reading: Disclosure Techniques

*There are several disclosure techniques that may assist you in reaching your goals. Consider reading *The Mixing Desk of LARP*ⁱ and investigating innehållsförteckningii: the creation of an ingredient list (much like a cooking ingredient list) for your intended LARP's experience. Also see "Creating*

an Ingredient List for your Game" on page 14, which further describes the incredibly vital process of event content transparency.

Space Allocation

Now that you have a story and site that complement each other, and you have spent some time determining and expressing your intended content, it is now time to consider your event space design. Reviewing the location where your event will take place allows you to not only figure out what decorations and scene-setting items you might need, but it will also help you allocate event space to match your game's needs. If the mechanical design of your game requires out-of-game space for story elements that take place "off-site," then you should designate play space as a dedicated narration area that is physically removed from the primary play space. If the theme and story of your event would benefit from a space for players to roleplay "off-camera" scenes, such as downtime actions or prelude interactions that the players decide their immortal characters would have had decades ago—then consider setting a designated Black Boxⁱⁱⁱ space specifically for these needs. lengthly, you may need a space from which to manage and direct volunteers and staff. Consider assigning a portion of the game space for logistics.

Focusing on the division between in-character space and out-of-character space helps players' immersion. Without a designated area to handle out-of-character or Storyteller narration needs, your participants will eventually drop character in your assigned play space and damage the immersion of all the participants around them. To help prevent character-dropping in the active play space, provide a space for your participants to use for out-of-character needs, such as taking personal phone calls, reviewing rulebooks, or taking breaks. Ensure that this area is sufficiently removed from the primary play space, so as to avoid having the out-of-character needs of your players interrupt or conflict with the roleplaying in the primary play space.

Lead by Example

Be sure that you teach your participants to use these in- and out-of-character spaces by not only instruction but also by example. Make sure that any staff members keep their out-of-character interactions and narrated scenes in the appropriate play spaces, away from the primary

i. *The Mixing Desk of Larp* created for The Larpwriter Summer School 2012. Many contributors come from Fantasiforbundet, Education center POST and LajvVerkstaden. For the 2013 Knutepunkt books, the article *The Mixing Desk of Larp* was written by Martin Nielsen and Martin Eckhoff Andresen.

ii. Innehållsförteckning was designed and developed by Karin Edman.

iii. The origins of the Black Box technique are uncertain. It is believed to have first been introduced as a technique in Nordic larp at Swedish, En stilla middag med familjen in 2007, where it was used as a meta room.

roleplaying space. Your **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** game could be decorated with a movie director's budget and with resources harvested from actual movie sets, but once your staff and players drop character within your play space, your event's immersion suffers. Any players walking through the space who are completely immersed in their characters' viewpoints and mindsets will have their illusion shattered when they see one of your staff members sitting with six other players at a table in the center of your play space participating in an "off-site" scene.

Set Decorations and Props

Finally, you should make decisions about scene-setting. When choosing decorations and props, keep reoccurring themes and consistency in mind when making design decisions.

Color Palettes

Choose a color palette of four to five colors and keep as many of your recurring props within that color scheme as possible. Reoccurring color palettes allow your players to either consciously or subconsciously associate your defined color scheme with an experience or story. If you have enough preparation time, research the color palettes used for movies or cartoons that share similar themes with your story. Your players may not consciously notice that the candles in a vampire's haven are a deep blue, the fabrics are an orange-red like sunset, the tablecloths are an off-white that is similar to sand, and the golden fabric hanging over the mirrors is metallic and similar to the same shade as treasure. However, when a Lasombra NPC enters the room from the darkest portion of shadows, a story will have been told without saying a word. The environment, despite using modern props, will feel like a pirate's den.

Real-World Inspiration

In addition to setting and following color palettes for your props, also consider decorative and architectural inspiration that matches the history and themes of your event. If your game focuses heavily on politics, you can draw inspiration from time periods and regions known for historic politics in order to wordlessly encourage the players to match the experience. For example, using visual cues inspired by ancient Greece may help inspire philosophical or political debates, or "high-minded" interaction, while using military surplus items and wartime paraphernalia will silently encourage militaristic and conflict-related themes. When striving to build tension and encourage your players to immerse themselves in the spirit of combat and wartime, you could provide World War II reproduction table maps in the area where your werewolf characters make tactical decisions. To foster a spirit of freedom and rebellion into a scene, your local werewolf pack could leave their biker

rockers, helmets, and crushed beer cans (the older the better) sitting around. These objects, while not directly related to the story, will encourage thoughts of rebellion and freedom, similar to the life of a 1970s biker. Regardless of your theme, thoughtfully choosing decorations as part of your scene-setting efforts will enhance your participants' immersion.

These techniques are not the only practices that can assist you in wordlessly building player immersion. Assisting players in the creation of diametrically opposed characters will also enhance immersion, as will using rituals and techniques to assist players in transitioning to their characters' headspaces. The points discussed above can be considered well before eager players arrive to take the lion's share of a Storyteller's time. From one game designer to another, I hope you choose to make active decisions in your set designs and, above all else, continue to create shared stories.

Biography

Michael Pucci is the Chief Creative Officer for both Eschaton Media INC and the Imagine Nation Collective. Michael first started running LARPs as a hobby in 1995 and since then has gone on to create several LARPs and interactive experiences, some of which include the *Dystopia Rising* LARP Network, *Chronos Universal* LARP System, *Devil Days*, *Sleepy Hollow: School of the Arcane*, *Utopia Descending*, *A Series of Hauntings*, and *American Excess*. Michael has worked on projects such as the *4-Horsemen of the Apocalypse* ARG, *I AM ZOMBIE* by Make Believe Games, *Writers Blocks*, and *Project: Paradigm*, and he is accredited as a contributor or resource on several other projects.



BREATH OF LIFE

By April Douglas

"You take people, you put them on a journey, you give them peril, you find out who they really are."

— Joss Whedon

For many players, both new and seasoned, one of the most daunting experiences in a LARP setting comes before the Storyteller even calls, "Game on!" Character creation can be an intimidating prospect, and often, the math is the least of a player's worries. Putting dots on a sheet is one thing, but creating an interesting character with a backstory and motivations can be a challenge. Some chronicles choose to remove this aspect of the creation process entirely by handing new players a character that already has a developed story. However, it is more likely that players will be expected to craft their own characters, with a history that they find personally compelling.

Creating a healthy, thriving LARP experience requires many moving parts: story, scenery, costuming, rules. But perhaps the most important aspect of any game—the aspect that is essential to the health of the in-game community—is its characters. Without well-developed characters that have unique voices and motivations, even the most visually stunning and story-rich game will fall flat. It is important that players strive to create characters with depth and vibrancy, as these characters help to drive a chronicle from start to finish.

In a **World of Darkness** game, most characters will have a supernatural template, but before she was a werewolf, vampire, or changeling, she was human, with all the benefits and flaws that accompany the mortal coil. When creating a new character, it is critical that a player view her character as a whole, rather than just the supernatural template that has been stacked on top of her. When describing a new character, she is more than just a "gun bunny," "necromancer," or "Ahroun." Sure, those terms offer a very broad overview of what the character does, but it doesn't do much to describe who she is. Where did the character grow up? What was her life like before she slipped into the **World of Darkness**? How does she view the world she now inhabits, and how does she view the world that exists above it? These are all questions a new player should explore before embarking on her first game.

When creating a new character for any game, there's no right or wrong way to go about it. Some players find inspiration in media—music, photographs, movies, or books—and they create the story behind the character

before building the sheet. Other players might find that they need a sheet before they can explore the character's personality. For some, a character's backstory might be something they wish to explore as the chronicle unfolds, so they leave most of the details bare. Regardless of how a player finds their way to the heart of its story, giving a character a breath of life will ultimately lead to a more fulfilling live-action roleplaying (LARP) experience for the player, as well as a more robust world for the entire chronicle.

Who?

The first step in the character creation process is discovering who the character is. This question encompasses the basic aspects of a character's story, and will begin to define her personality and goals. Often, this step involves deciding on an *archetype* for the character. This brief concept offers a broad view of who the character is and what she does. Is she a hero or an anti-hero? Is she a loner or a socialite? Is she a leader or an introvert? Deciding on an archetype offers the player a framework before continuing on to delve into the character's story and motivations.

Once you have a basic concept in mind for your character, it is time to start exploring the details of her life. While these questions are by no means exhaustive, they can help paint a picture of a character, providing a starting point for the creation process.

Some questions you might ask yourself as you begin to explore your new character are:

- *What is your character's name?* Does she have any nicknames or commonly known titles? Does she keep her real name a secret?
- *Who is her immediate family?* Are her parents or grandparents still alive? Does she have a spouse or children? What is her relationship with these family members, and how do they affect her life?
- *Who are her friends and allies?* Who are her enemies? Who does she socialize with? Has she maintained friendships from before her time as a supernatural

creature? If so, how does she balance the monster that she is with those relationships?

- *What does she do for a living?* Did she hold this job prior to her Embrace/First Change/etc.? How does she feel about what she does for a living? If she doesn't have a job, how does she pass her time?
- *What is her social class?* Does she have an education? How does she feel about her wealth—or lack thereof—and how does it affect her?

What?

Once you have determined who your character is, it is time to determine what she is and what she does within the **World of Darkness**. These questions allow a player to explore her character's supernatural aspects and how they affect the character.

Consider these questions:

- *What is her creature type?* What is her clan/tribe/auspice/seeming/court/etc?
- *How did she become supernatural?* Describe the moments leading up to her Embrace or First Change. Was this transformation willing and welcome, or was it forced on the character?
- *How does she feel about what she is?* How has her supernatural template changed the way that she views the world? Does she fully embrace the darker side of humanity, or does she long for the days when she was a mere mortal?
- *How does she feel about other supernatural creatures within the **World of Darkness**?* Has she had any interaction with them?
- *What is her traditional purpose within the **World of Darkness**,* and how does she feel about the role she has been cast into?

These aspects of a character help a player determine how she will interact with the other denizens of the **World of Darkness**. Conflict is the heart of every LARP experience, and a supernatural backstory allows conflict to be considered and explored. Perhaps the character lost her mortal family to werewolves, or she was unceremoniously Embraced before being dumped by her sire. These conflicts may help to drive roleplay and create dramatic tension for the player and the chronicle as a whole.

When and Where?

When creating a character, it is important to remember that this character is more than the dots on her sheet. She, like any person you encounter on a daily basis, is the sum of her experiences. Once you have an idea of who and what your character is, it is time to consider the experiences

that have shaped her life. While some of these aspects will rarely, if ever, come into play, they help shape how a character reacts to the world around her.

Some questions you might find useful are:

- *When and where was she born?* What were the circumstances of her birth? For example, was she born in a manor house to wealthy aristocrats or a girls' home to a single teen mother?
- *When and where was transformed into a supernatural creature?* How was she introduced to the **World of Darkness**?
- *Name three events from the year of her birth that might have influenced her life.*
- *Name three events from the year of her supernatural transformation that might have shaped her new life.*
- *What is one modern event that currently affects her?*
- *How does her personal history shape her thoughts, goals, and values?*

Players should explore world events during the character's history. Some of these events may be intensely personal, while others may have affected many others. This is a perfect opportunity to tie a character's backstory to the stories of other characters in the chronicle. Perhaps the characters went to school together or are related. These interpersonal relationships can add depth and richness to character interactions, as well as offer characters something to discuss during roleplay.

Why?

As you continue to expand on your character's background, you will have to answer some difficult questions such as "why?" Why does this character do the things that she does? These questions will often refer back to the archetype you picked in the first step. Here you can further explore the reasoning behind what makes this character the way she is.

Some questions you might ask yourself include:

- *What compels this character to remain active with her fellow supernaturals?* What drives her to continue her existence?
- *What does she seek in the **World of Darkness**?* Is she motivated by power, money, glory, or knowledge?
- *What would she do to gain the things she desires?* What would she risk?
- *What secrets does the character hold?* How would she react if other characters discovered them, and how does she hide her secrets from others?

Often, when we create characters, we forget to focus on this aspect of the creation process. Players may automatically assume these reasons are simply captured in the fact that this character is part of the chronicle, because the player wants to portray her. But exploring her motivations

provides another opportunity to explore a deeper facet of the character, to dig for the reasons a character might act the way she does. Small details, such as these, help to complete a character and make her a real person with depth and personality.

Driving Force

No character is complete without a driving force: a series of goals that she wishes to achieve. Distinct from past motivations, these goals offer players something to strive for, while giving Storytellers a carrot to encourage ongoing story.

When considering goals for a character, it is important to look at the projected length of a chronicle. If a game is expected to run for five years, and all your character goals are easily obtainable within the first six months of game play, you might find yourself getting bored without the driving force of these goals.

As you create your character, you should consider setting at least six goals for her. These can range from something simple—such as purchasing and establishing a territory—to something extraordinary—such as achieving the rank of Legend. These goals should vary in difficulty, but they should be something that will always encourage your character to move forward.

The following is a sample list of goals that can be set for characters:

- *Two goals that can be accomplished within a year* (or single game, if the chronicle will be extremely short or a one-shot.)
- *Two goals that can be accomplished within three years* (or within the first half of the projected chronicle length.)
- *One goal that is the primary overarching character goal for the entirety of the chronicle.*
- *One nigh-impossible goal that may not ever be achieved.* This achievement should be something that is highly risky, with an equally high reward.

It is important to remember that character goals will often change throughout the course of a chronicle. Part of the fun of LARP is seeing the way our characters are influenced and changed by the people and experiences they encounter during play. These encounters can cause a character's goals to shift and evolve. Players should occasionally revisit their list of goals to update or add to the list.

Character Backgrounds in the World of Darkness

The **World of Darkness** can be a violent and terrifying place, filled with the most depraved aspects of society. We can safely explore many of these ideas in LARP. Violence, intimacy, abuse, and trauma are just some of the themes

that can potentially affect a character who exists in this world. However, it is important that these themes are handled with care and sensitivity. While a compelling story can be crafted by putting a character through all manner of horrors, players must always remember that they are part of a larger whole.

Most Storytellers communicate topics that are forbidden in their chronicles. When in doubt—ask! It is fun to see our characters suffer in the **World of Darkness**, but it's not fun to see our friends suffering when they encounter something during play that is potentially harmful to them. What might be a compelling and interesting story to one player could be harmful and upsetting to another. In these situations, communication is key, and it is vital that players discuss sensitive topics with one another before they arise in game.

Conclusion

One of the greatest appeals of roleplaying games is the opportunity to explore things we may never encounter in our mundane lives. We have the opportunity to create grand stories and wild adventures in worlds different from our own. We use the details of our characters' backgrounds to help us drive the story forward and build the shared world that the characters in a chronicle inhabit.

The character creation process can be intimidating as it ranges from researching historical facts to ensuring we handle sensitive subjects in a delicate manner. But for many players, this process is part of the excitement of the game: the opportunity to sculpt the life of a character and give her flaws and foibles that make her more than just dots on a sheet. We have the chance to bring our characters to life through their experiences and stories, weaving intricate and diverse backgrounds.

Of course, you can portray a character with minimal details or background stories, but part of the fun of LARP is creating and portraying different characters that represent an entirely separate persona with their own desires and needs. Ultimately, it is these characters, the ones that have been fully brought to life with stories, goals, and motivations of their own, that help drive a chronicle forward and create an exciting experience for the players.

Biography

April Douglas has been gaming and writing for fifteen years. She is a contributing writer to **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. In addition to her work with **By Night Studios**, her fiction has appeared in *Zombiefied III: Hazardous Material*, *Hoofbeats: Flying with Magical Horses*, and in *The Bloody Key Society Periodical*. When she's not chasing after her son, she can be found at her computer, writing romance novels and diving into freelance work.



BRINGING OTHERS INTO THE FOLD

How to Create Inclusive Mind's Eye Theatre LARPs

By J. Childs-Biddle

Bias is a natural part of every human being's psyche. Each person's background, history, and personal experiences form how they think about and approach a person. Sometimes, these preconceptions are helpful and provide useful context for an interaction, but often they are harmful and cause people to ignore important social cues and treat others based on stereotypes. While these biases are natural, it is not compulsory that they influence every thought and action. A vital part of being human is dissecting these thoughts and realizing they are not some unavoidable pathway. They can be recognized and analyzed, and then you can take steps to create a more welcoming environment outside of those biases. This practice is especially important in the **Mind's Eye Theatre (MET)** environment, where games can live and breathe, or wither away slowly, based on how their participants treat individuals.

MET Live-action roleplaying games (LARPs) are an avenue to express and explore aspects of our personality, both as a person and a community. As a result, LARPs attract people from various backgrounds, which diversifies our experience and brings both new blood and original minds to the game. Despite this, LARPs can fail to create an inclusive environment for these people in both noticeable, and not-so-noticeable, ways—such as falling back on tropes and stereotypes that make others feel unwelcomed or unwanted. When this happens, everyone loses. The **MET** game loses the opportunity to include a new member, and the new member loses their taste for LARP.

In **Mind's Eye Theatre Vampire: The Masquerade** and **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**, there are a number of ways, both tangible and intangible, to alter the LARP environment and promote inclusivity. These tools reflect that LARP is made up of people of different abilities, cultures, backgrounds, genders, and sexual preferences in respectful ways, and they encourage visibility while not resorting to stereotypes. These techniques reassure our players that our LARP games seek to include them, rather than exclude them. They create an environment where our players feel safe and welcomed, and where a healthy LARP environment can flourish.

Note: *Players should not be made to feel that accommodations were made especially for them as a method of singling them out; the techniques should be utilized to improve the **MET** environment for everyone. These methods can be used to adjust games and meld them seamlessly into the environment or gameplay. In addition, when these techniques are established at the beginning of a LARP, they will need to be reevaluated throughout the lifetime of the game to ensure that everyone's needs are still being met.*

Choosing Advocates

One person in a **MET** game cannot effectively manage all of the different tools needed to create an inclusive game, nor can one person represent the breadth of experiences for a group of players. In order to better to service the game's participants, a Storyteller may wish to appoint, or have the game vote on, one or two advocates who can assist in gauging player issues and helping players communicate needs to the Storyteller. For most games, these advocates will not have any decision-making authority, but they act to facilitate information between players and staff. In addition, players should be encouraged to act as their own advocates when they feel there is room for improvement.


Tangible

Tangible techniques focus on alterations to the LARP environment that players often touch and see when they visit **MET** games. For many, these qualities influence the first impressions others form about a LARP and help set the level of initial comfort. These are suggestions. You may find additional ways to assist your player base.

Site Accessibility

Physical Accessibility

Physical accessibility to the game site refers to how easy the site is for others to use. Take into consideration whether the site has wheelchair access, or if players who may have mobility issues can easily navigate the entire site.



While decorations and room set-up encourage immersion, the Storyteller and event staff should keep in mind that people need to move through each room in a safe manner, so keeping main pathways clear of obstacles ensures those who need to move throughout the space are able to do so.

Physical and Emotional Safety

The game site should be located in a place where a diverse player base feels comfortable. While some game sites are hard to come by, a Storyteller should research a chosen area and poll players to ensure that everyone feels comfortable traveling to and from it. Game sites in locations that have a history of violence or discrimination against People of Color (PoC), the LGBTQ community, or women are not the safest place for those players to attend a LARP. Using those types of locations can immediately put them ill at ease.

LARP Tools

Materials

Materials for your MET LARP, such as handouts, character creation guides, and character sheets, should come in a variety of formats for players to choose from. You can create brief how-to videos on YouTube, reading materials, or podcasts to appeal to a variety of learners.

In addition, when creating reading materials (including those on a LARP-specific website), consider how the font format and page layout make the materials easy to read and digest. The person preparing the documentation should use headers to make information easier for players to parse, as well as research which fonts may be ideal for your group, in both written and online formats. Free online classes are available teaching the basics of graphic design and how to incorporate the best practices.

Variants on Character Creation

Some people are kinesthetic learners, especially those who may have faced difficulties reading or in academia. Storytellers should sit down on request, without asking for more details, with any player who requests help, walking the player through each step of the character creation process—including any necessary house rules, approvals, or other documents for their characters.

Intangible

Intangible techniques focus on alterations in mindsets and LARP direction that might not necessarily be obvious. These practices help build a foundation for your LARP in less-obvious ways and reduce the amount of distraction and discomfort players may feel when they enter certain situations.

Social Safety

Definitions

At the beginning of any LARP chronicle, and throughout its span, it is important to get all of the players and Storytellers on the same page regarding the meaning of certain words or actions. Everyone should gather and determine what slang, slurs, and other language, as well as themes, are acceptable within the context of the game and what things are forbidden at all times. While everyone has their own perceptions of any one phrase or action, having clear definitions of acceptable behavior helps prevent negative feelings out-of-character when someone says something in-character that may be offensive.

Conduct Guides

Once of the basic definitions have been set up, another important step is establishing a conduct guide for the LARP. This guide should address how players are expected to act and provide clear consequences for failing to adhere to the conduct standards. Players should know what is expected of them and feel safe in knowing that when someone violates this conduct policy, it will be addressed. The conduct guide needs to be applied fairly, even to a Storyteller or other staff, to show that everyone is beholden to the social contract of the LARP.

Spirit of the Rules

Sometimes players in a MET LARP will try to skirt the letter of the law in the conduct guide and claim they have done no harm. This situation is frustrating to other participants and can cause friction and dissatisfaction, especially if that player continues to toe the line of conduct guide. It is often effective to deal with players who do this by adding a clause to the conduct guide regarding the importance of adhering to the spirit of the rules, and stating that repeated behavior intentionally meant to antagonize others out-of-character will be addressed with consequences.

Speaking Up

It is everyone's responsibility to speak up when they see issues of harassment or discrimination. No one person is responsible for policing the community, and the conduct guide should state that such behavior will not be tolerated.

Horizontal Communication

Horizontal communication is the communication that occurs between two people of equal standing. As a Storyteller, many feel that they are "in charge" of a LARP; however, the game doesn't run without its players, and they own the story just as much as the staff responsible for telling it. It is vital that players feel comfortable communicating information horizontally to Storytellers. While upward communication—where a player reports information

to someone who can more appropriately handle it—will occur, most feedback loops work better when people feel as though they are speaking to their social equals.

Safe Spaces

LARPs should establish a location out-of-character that is a *safe space* for players to use as a retreat. Sometimes, situations in a LARP can seem overwhelming and cause distress. The OK Check-In method addresses one way to handle this, but ensuring a player has somewhere to retreat and someone to speak to (if they desire) confidentially is important. Information exchanged between a player and the advocacy staff/Storyteller should be held in confidence from the rest of the players. Players should know their staff will keep their concerns private.

Workshops

Workshops are another way players and Storytellers can communicate with one another. They allow participants to focus on issues that may need a bit more attention, and they provide an environment where people work together to create a common goal.

Social Meetings

Social meetings occur outside of the game space. Many players only know each other through their characters, and this circumstance limits their experience with other game participants. Since their experience is confined to these situations, they may have negative feelings based on their in-character interactions. Using the game space to have movie or board game nights, or just having dinner together prior to a game session, can increase bonding between all members of the LARP and help them feel more comfortable communicating with one another. This practice also reduces bleed and helps people decompress in an environment of peers and friends.

One-on-Ones and Suggestion Boxes

Some players may feel they are better served either bringing their concerns to the Storytelling and advocacy staff or by submitting them anonymously. For the former, it is simple to schedule one-on-one sessions with each player, giving each person 5 to 10 minutes before a game quarterly or bi-annually to discuss any concerns they have or ways the game could be improved. Another way to collect feedback is by using an anonymous suggestion box. Both of these methods can be used to identify areas where the game can improve and craft workshop material to teach players and staff, as well as foster an environment of contribution and inclusivity.

NPC and Character Creation

Seeing yourself represented in your favorite media can be an exhilarating experience. For many, such representation communicates acceptance and confirms that they are

finally visible to the community. However, there are few things that can kill a welcoming high faster than seeing those representations fall back on old tropes and stereotypes. Nothing can alienate a player faster than making their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, sexual preferences, or disability a joke.

The first thing to remember when creating both non-player (NPC) and player-characters (PCs) is that those representations never show the whole of a person. They are small part of an overall picture, and while they may help form some experiences and anecdotes, they aren't the only story a PC or a NPC has to tell. If either falls back on tropes repeatedly, the player or Storyteller needs to go back to the drawing board to flesh out the character's concept more. One person's sexuality, race, or other feature is never a concept. The best characters are those with complicated motives, often-conflicting goals, and complex stories; not one of those can be reduced to an angry black woman or a flamboyantly gay male.

In addition, Storytellers and players should not assume that their experience represents a whole. Listen to other players and their feedback. If they identify something as problematic, do not disregard their thoughts out of hand because they don't match your own. As roleplayers, many people choose to portray character aspects that are not their own, but others will have a deep well of experience from which to draw. Certainly don't treat anyone as the token member of their race, gender, or sexuality, but ensure if you are going to incorporate parts of those concepts into your character's background that you research them well. Playing outside of your own experience takes 100 times the research and willingness to listen to others.

Example: *Kim is starting a new MET Werewolf: The Apocalypse LARP. Her initial player base are all friends that she knows well, but she wants the game to grow. She searches out a site that is easily accessible to the players, which has wheelchair ramps. She knows her friend, Joe, has dyslexia, so when she's creating her player materials, she researches what fonts are helpful to him, and also holds some Skype sessions to go over character creation and find out what themes work best. The player base says they're okay with slurs, but they want to stay away from using themes of sexual violence during game sessions.*

As the game grows, some new players come to Kim and tell her that not only does she have a problematic character—one of her players decided to play a transgender individual and is falling back on tropes—but also that the slurs used during game sessions are becoming overwhelming.

Werewolves have bigger things to worry about. Kim meets with all the players during a workshop and reassesses the conduct code—the game adjusts them, indicating that slurs are no longer acceptable. The game staff sits down with the player of the problematic character during a one-on-one session to rework elements of its background, pointing out specific concerns with

previous portrayals. If the player continues to intentionally portray the character in the current manner, staff informs the player that the character will be retired and the player will need to make a new character.

Throughout the game, Kim and her staff listen to the players, adjust the game's needs, and ensure that the game is welcoming to all.

Conclusion

Live-action roleplaying in **MET** is a hobby that draws people from all walks of life—there is nothing more alluring than slipping into the skin and thoughts of another person or creature for a few hours and becoming someone else. However, those players are still people, and they still deserve for their game sessions to suit their needs. Creating LARPs that are accessible and confront bias head-on are vital to a healthy community.

Biography

J. Childs-Biddle is a horror and role-playing game writer, experimenting with their life and fiction.

Their stories focus on stories of Old Gods, anguished spirits, and terribly unfortunate people, while also spending time digging into articles about LARP Safety calibration, microbiology, psychology, and cephalopods in wild attempts to piece these elements into dark horror, blog articles, or designing educational games for children.

Currently, their work can be found in *Under the Stairs*, *Apotheosis: Stories of Human Survival After the Rise of the Elder Gods*, and the new **Mind's Eye Theater: Werewolf: The Apocalypse**.



WHAT YOU HAVE TO GAIN BY PLAYING TO LOSE

By Erica Schoonmaker

The first time I played in a Nordic live-action roleplaying (LARP) event, it was at the *College of Wizardry* game in Poland. I played a student character, and in my first class, the professor character had us cast a specific incantation that we practiced aloud as a group and then used on a volunteer student. Despite my ten years of LARP experience in the United States, this style of LARP was brand new to me, and I was very nervous about playing with people who were much more familiar and comfortable with the style than I was. As a result of my nerves, when my turn came to cast the spell, I ended up mispronouncing the incantation, and the other student roleplayed that my spell failed.

In the AmericanLARPs that I'm used to, I might have been able to save face by dropping out-of-character for a moment to explain that my character would not have botched the incantation and that it was an out-of-character mistake—the other players would have likely let the mistake slide. However, in this style of game, dropping out-of-character in that manner to correct an in-character flub is not typically an option; players are instead encouraged to roll with the punches, so to speak. Thus, I made the conscious decision to play up the mistake instead; I continued to roleplay my character messing up her spells throughout the entire class. She was so utterly embarrassed by her failures that she ran out at the end, close to tears, as the professor tutted about a “waste of talent.” This choice created a dramatic turning point in my game, causing my character to suddenly struggling with the idea that maybe she's not as good as she thought. It was great roleplay and created a game experience that my fellow players and I wouldn't have had otherwise. I realized then how refreshing and fun it can be to play this way.

Play for What's Interesting

The concept I've just described is called *playing to lose* in Nordic and freeform LARP communities. Players use this strategy to facilitate drama in their roleplay by specifically not trying to “win” during every interaction and, instead, letting their character “lose” to create a better story. The sole purpose of playing to lose is to make a game more engaging for all of the players, which is why it's also known as “playing for what's interesting.” When every player in a LARP is utilizing this concept, the roleplay within that

game becomes more engaging, dynamic, and unexpected.

Playing to lose is not a new or unique idea, nor is it exclusive to freeform games. The basic concept has been around as long as roleplaying games have existed, and many players from different LARPing systems have used similar techniques in their own games, often recounting the resulting dramatic stories as the zenith of their LARP experiences. Playing to lose is a flexible concept that can be used by players with little difficulty in any type of game or rule-system, even ones that aren't inherently freeform or collaborative. In this essay I'll discuss this concept further, contrast it with other concepts, and present ways for players and Storytellers to introduce and explore this concept in their own games.

What's Wrong with Winning?

It is often assumed that the goal of any game is to “win” it, usually via competitive play. We see this expectation in many board games, card games, video games, and even roleplaying games. Players are pitted against each other or against an entity in the game, with either a single player or a group coming out on top as the “winner.” This concept is called gamism. However, LARP games can be much more nebulous. Yes, Player vs. Environment (PvE) and Player vs. Player (PvP) mechanics absolutely exist, especially in games like **Vampire: The Masquerade** and **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. These types of rules encourage gamist-minded players to play seeking a specific goal. This playstyle typically manifests as a plotline that, when followed to its end, yields a predictable result—the bad things die, and the players get some sort of reward for their efforts, such as titles, status, or objects that enhance their characters' abilities.

There's nothing inherently wrong with gamism, but this approach in LARP games can produce less-interesting and often-repetitive stories. How often do your vampire character's gatherings get attacked by werewolves, or the Sabbat? Pretty often, I'd wager—perhaps even every single time you have a game! This is where gamism fails; it doesn't create stimulating, dramatic plot that keeps players engaged outside of combat scenarios.

Winning doesn't have to be, and really shouldn't be, the end-all-be-all goal in every LARP. Sandbox or freeform

games, especially, don't mesh well with that approach, because there might not even be a formal Storyteller or overarching plotlines in such games. In many Nordic games, for example, all plotlines are player-created and player-driven.

Introducing Playing to Lose to Your Games

Playing to lose is beneficial in LARPs, because it flips the gamist approach on its head and can lead players, and in turn the stories they create, in new and exciting directions. Playing to lose encourages plots that are less linear, allowing players to explore different branches they might not have considered before and to create their own personal plots around their characters' actions. The goal of the game becomes not "how do we win?" but "how can I make this more intriguing for myself and those playing with me?" and "what will be most enjoyable to play?" The game, along with the Storytellers and staff, can then emphasize more discovery and better support player imagination.

For Storytellers

Introducing this concept to a LARP as a Storyteller starts with talking to your players. You can include some information about playing to lose in game materials or run a workshop before sessions so that players can become familiar with the idea beforehand. Make sure your players have a safe environment in which to comfortably fail and take risks as their characters. Incorporating consent mechanics along with the playing to lose concept is highly recommended, and you'll find an essay about those mechanics elsewhere in this anthology. Adding both to your game allows for player comfort in exploring their characters fully.

For Players

As a player, introducing this strategy to your roleplay repertoire starts with asking yourself the question, "what would be most fun to play?" Playing to lose centers on creating a rewarding experience for you, the player, so play concepts you think will be engaging and have fun! Utilizing this tool during games may take some practice, especially if it's a very different style from what you're used to playing, but the roleplay that blooms out of using this technique can be very rewarding.

Working with Playing to Lose

Playing to lose as a concept comes from a LARP culture in which games are shorter and mechanics are light. However this origin doesn't mean that the technique cannot be utilized in **World of Darkness** games, which are often

the opposite. You just need to make some adaptations to better suit your needs within your individual games and communities.

Ideas for Storytellers

- Consider placing less emphasis on character sheets and/or allowing players to keep their experience points after losing a character to help alleviate players' fear of "losing their progress." Character loss is one of the strongest factors driving players' fear of risk-taking, because players don't want to lose all the hard work they put into their characters.
- If you're a Storyteller in an organization running games that are interconnected with other games across a large network, character sheets are your bread-and-butter, and they can't really be deemphasized. But don't worry; you can still adapt playing to lose to work in these LARP games! Consider earmarking a few games out of the year, maybe one or two to start, to use as "personal plot" games. Utilize these designated games to emphasize the interpersonal plot between the player-characters in your LARP. Work with your players to bring aspects of their backstories to the forefront, ask if they have any secrets they'd like to be revealed or used in game somehow. Also ask them what kind of plot points would most appeal to them during a game where mechanical combat may not occur. This approach can get players thinking about their characters' histories and motivations, rather than what powers are on their sheets. Sometimes players who are very used to gamism just need a little push in the right direction.
- When using mechanical consequences, such as status bans, encourage your players to use them to drive dramatic play, rather than view these results as a detriment. In **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**, for example, a character might receive a Stone of Scorn as a constant reminder of a wrongdoing, but instead of focusing on the shame, encourage the player to focus on the task she must complete to remove it. This goal can involve other characters, too, and help facilitate interactions between players.

Ideas for Players

- Help out your Storyteller by identifying specific portions of your character's backstory that can be used in game plots to stir dramatic roleplay.
- Seek out like-minded players in your group, speak to them about playing to lose, and then utilize the concept together! Agree to hold each other accountable for driving roleplay.
- Set good examples for others by actively using playing to lose in your games.

Examples from Nordic LARP

At present, two NordicLARPs exist for the World of Darkness Vampire: The Masquerade setting: *End of the Line* and *Convention of Thorns*. While both games use the same setting material, they take place at different times (*End of the Line* is a modern game, *Convention of Thorns* is historical) and encourage playing to lose in different ways.

Convention of Thorns

To encourage participants to play to lose, the *Convention of Thorns* events took a transparent approach. All character sheets and casting for the game were available for all players to read before the LARP began. In my own experience, I've often found players in my local Vampire game unwilling to talk to me about their characters' secrets or plots, even if the conversation took place completely out-of-character. A secret in a LARP is valueless if it never comes into play, and the design choice made by the *Convention of Thorns* organizers was very effective, letting secrets be disseminated among players and utilized during play. With almost all character information at every player's fingertips, fear of revealing one's secrets no longer became an issue or a concern, but instead was more actively used during play. Players collaborated beforehand to determine the kinds of stories they wanted to play out.

End of the Line

Like another side of a coin, the *End of the Line* game took a rather different approach to exposing secrets. During *End of the Line*, players were also strongly encouraged to play to lose, but in that scenario, they did not have access to other players' character sheets. Instead, each player received their character sheet individually, which included some pre-described relationships and groupings. Participants were specifically instructed to not talk to anyone else about whether or not their character was a vampire—that mystery was key to the atmosphere of the game. Instead, players were encouraged to let loose during play, within their comfort limits, and to really emphasize being vampires during play, if applicable. (Those of us playing vampires were even given vials of fake blood and encouraged to use them liberally.) This encouragement to “show, don't tell” one's supernatural nature conflicts with the traditional secrecy associated with being a vampire in this setting. In many Vampire games, vampires wouldn't feed from and Embrace humans in crowded nightclubs, letting blood drip obviously down their lips—they'd be breaching the ever-important Masquerade. And yet, that's exactly what happened during *End of the Line*! The reveal felt natural, as opposed to players having to process an

information dump like that used during *Convention of Thorns*, which relied on players actually reading, or at least skimming, all those character backstories.

Trying these Approaches in Your Game

Both approaches—open information and secrecy—have their value and work to suit different types of gameplay. Depending on the setting and type of LARP you are running, you may choose to try one of these methods during your own game sessions. It can be difficult to get players comfortable sharing their character sheets and backstories with others, let alone offering full transparency like that used during *Convention of Thorns*, but this option is particularly viable for small games. Having character profiles on a wiki or database that's accessible to all players is one way to utilize this method.


In a large game, *End of the Line*'s approach is easier to implement. For example, you can encourage players to roleplay their flaws or derangements. Flaws like *Careless*, *Curiosity*, *Impatient*, and *Intolerance* all have a dramatic element that can absolutely be roleplayed during game sessions and can possibly put characters in compromising situations.

Go Forth and Play to Lose

Ultimately, the concept of playing to lose emphasizes one thing: what drives your roleplay and makes it fun or interesting? There is intrinsic value in exploring ideas and stories together with your fellow players, even if it means “losing” more than “winning.” In order to achieve a more dynamic story and game, players also need more interesting and often personal elements to drive their motivations. The best way to promote such stories is to encourage players to make choices that are not only more enjoyable for each individual player, but also result in more interesting and unexpected play for everyone involved.

Biography

Erica Schoonmaker has more than eleven years' experience playing in LARPs, having gotten her start in college with **World of Darkness** games. Since then, she's attended a variety of games across the United States, Canada, and Europe. Most recently, she's started documenting her adventures in LARP and travel on her blog *Little & Fierce* (littleandfierce.com), with the hope of encouraging others to explore other LARPing cultures and see what the world has to offer.



COOPERATIVE CONFLICT AND ADVANCED NARRATION: Expert Tools for Story Creation

By Jimmy Reckitt

"The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing."

— Marcus Aurelius

At the heart of every great story is a great conflict. Many exceptional characters are defined by their rivalries and the lengths they go to to succeed. In a live-action roleplaying (LARP) experience, conflict can be character-defining as well, providing a vehicle for players to find themselves as their values and their mettle are tested. For this reason, it is possible to take a measure of a character—and even an entire game—by the way conflicts are presented, handled, and resolved. Games that are high in struggle and strife or competitive between players create a different atmosphere than games that take a more casual approach. Here we are going to explore a system that seeks a balance between the two styles, offering a means to pursue conflict cooperatively, as well as a means of furthering stories through narration beyond the scope of a single scenario.

Fundamentals of Cooperative Conflict

Conflict as part of a game's storyline (often called plot) is frequently simple; antagonists are clearly defined with morals and objectives in direct contrast to the players', and pursuing these antagonists typically results in few or no social consequences from other players. Conflict between player-characters can be a bit more complicated. Characters will have goals not necessarily in opposition to other characters, and taking action against them may result in social consequences or retaliation. Such conflicts also have a tendency to escalate quickly, with character death a common occurrence, resulting in an unsatisfying conclusion for one party. Conflicts that degenerate to this level can also lead to blunt or uncreative gameplay tangents, without outcomes decided by mass combats. Also, when character conflict becomes too intense, it carries a high risk of bleed, where immersive feelings linger beyond the

session. But just as LARP is an experience in cooperative storytelling, so too can a rival be handled cooperatively, and for that, we can look to an unlikely.

As a means of entertainment, professional wrestling is all about showcasing conflict. Every match, promo, and interview centers on conflict, with an occasional mcguffin of a championship belt thrown in. Writers must handle challenges of talent rotating in and out, establishing the identity of a character in a very short time. In preparation for premium events, rivalries are built, which must appear both interesting and believable enough for an audience, all for the purpose of creating a grand spectacle of a finale.

Cooperative conflict is different from most clashes in LARP. As opposed to being competitive, the purpose of cooperative conflict is to tell a story, rather than pit skills of one character against another. With the competitive aspect removed (or at the very least, kept to a manageable level), all participants gain the benefit of becoming collaborators as opposed to competitors. Working together, they can tell the story of their rivalry, giving one another ample time to shine.

Entering into this sort of agreement is optional, of course. Neither party is obligated to pursue a prolonged rivalry with one another, nor are they obliged to adhere to a structure as part of creating their characters' stories. Rather, this method is for those who seek an amicable means of exploring a conflict that involves boundaries and collaboration.

Work Out an Understanding

To begin this process, it is necessary to form some kind of out-of-character understanding between the involved parties. This step is important, as the process will involve some amount of give and take, as well as some degree of pacing. This negotiation may be easiest when characters are starting a new game and craft a rivalry for one another

in their backstories, but it can also certainly be worked out between game sessions.

Don't Rush It

In professional wrestling, the outcome of a good rivalry is never rushed. During weekly shows, wrestlers will fume and circle around each other, participating in small matches or fighting to no conclusion, all for the sake of selling a major event. Likewise, if players wish to have a conflict as part of their story, they should be in no hurry to see it resolved either. The conflict and the feelings that go with it are all about the experience. Give and expect ample time to react to the machinations of your rival before moving on to the counterstroke. Bring your reactions into the shared environment, and let others see how it affects your character.

Maintain Parity

Perhaps most importantly, some degree of parity should be maintained. This balance involves keeping your conflict within the established range of the story, and not going overboard. If you and your rival are both Tremere acolytes vying for a coveted position, blowing up her haven would be a bit excessive. Likewise, selling her out to the Sabbat would be a bit much, though if you found out she was collaborating with the enemy, you would no doubt do your duty. As part of a cooperative conflict, you should determine its desired severity. Once it is chosen, both you and your partner-rival should adhere to it, giving her out-of-character notice if you feel the story has taken it in a different direction. This practice allows you to effectively trade blows without adding worry for your character's survival.

Degrees of Conflict

For the purposes of codifying and managing degrees of cooperative conflict, let's define three different tiers.

Tier 1: Inconvenience/Skirmish

At this tier, both parties are trying to inconvenience one another. This conflict may be because one or both parties are petty or vindictive at heart, or have a relationship as frenemies. Both parties are likely on the same side with similar goals, and are possibly ostensible friends. This rivalry may take the form of acts of minor aggression or dominance that inconvenience the other. If matters were to become physical, rarely would things escalate beyond a shove or a thrown fist or two.

Tier 2: Embarrassment/Injury

At the second tier, both parties are trying to embarrass one another. This conflict may be because both are

in competition for a position or for resources, or have divergent goals. Both parties are on the same side in some matters, but are unlikely to be friends. This rivalry manifests as undermining one another's plans, typically with subtle, rather than overt means, and a willingness to see the other lose face. If it were to come to blows, fighting might get involved, but stop short of incapacitation or significant injury.

Tier 3: Humiliation/Incapacitation

At the third tier, both parties are united in their mutual disdain and seek the humiliation of one another. They have very likely reached their limits, each bearing a history of reasons as to why they cannot abide the other's presence in the same city, let alone the same room. Both parties might pretend at civility, but would gladly snipe at or undermine the other if given the opportunity. Each will seek to thwart the other in their goals, even if only for spite. Should a fight ensue, each would seek to cause the other as much injury as possible, stopping short of death.

Conflicts that go above these tiers, perhaps seeking the death of either party, are not well suited for cooperative conflict. While conflicts that result in the death of either party are certainly valid, their divisive nature and zero-sum nature mean they're best resolved through competitive means, i.e., gameplay and mechanics.

Advanced Narration

There are times when, for the purpose of creating a better story, it may be better for one party to lose in a situation or challenge that would normally be determined by game mechanics. This situation often occurs when a win for the other party would make sense for a character's concept, such as being a canny manipulator or a valiant fighter. A character written as a CEO-turned-vampire would likely tend to succeed at business dealings, and a femme fatale would be particularly effective at seduction. By allowing a character to succeed in such a situation suited to its nature, its fundamental concept is reinforced, allowing it to become better defined and more iconic. It also takes a "yes, and..." approach to story, adding to the conflict and keeping momentum going.

In wrestling, concessions are often made to help reinforce an up-and-coming character, where one wrestler will lose to the other (often in dramatic fashion) to help further the story. Giving a good performance, even when it will result in a deliberate loss, is called "doing the job," and it helps to establish featured performers.

Though it can help advance story in a LARP situation, participants are often hesitant or unwilling to lose. Players who feel invested in a conflict are likely to be cautious of giving away any advantage, as small victories have a habit of building into larger ones. Personal pride may be a factor

as well, as well as competitive feelings. However, when it comes to cooperative conflicts in both wrestling and in LARP, the most entertainment can be had when both parties are at relative parity. It's no fun if someone wins all the time, and if one party has been winning a lot, then the other party is certainly due a win or moment of triumph to keep things interesting.

As part of managing a cooperative conflict, players can handle these situations by agreeing to relent or "do the job" in lieu of a mechanical resolution, in exchange for an advantage later on. This exchange can be made as a resolution to a single incident, or as part of a protracted rivalry, using *Advanced Narration*. When this advantage is cashed in, the player who relented earlier can choose from a variety of story options depending on the severity of the concession given, which represent her character's retaliation at a later time, and which must be accepted. The exact means are worked out with the Storyteller, likely constructed in accordance with the retaliating character's concepts and proficiencies, and done unbeknownst to the player who received the win. Additionally, the player whose character received the concession should agree to accept a reasonable degree of narration regarding how the retaliation took place. The Storyteller involved will ensure that the retaliation is within the bounds of the established parameters and appropriate for both stories. For the purpose

of keeping the conflict at a managed level, both concession and retaliation should be kept proportional, drawing from the charts below. Additionally, the advantage should be cashed in within a reasonable timeframe, such as within three game sessions.

For this system to work, good faith must be maintained by both parties. For example, if the player of a Brujah to agrees to relent to the effects of a Chimestry challenge, she should take care to roleplay its effects. Likewise, if the Ravnos player who used Chimestry finds a group of police officers have raided the establishment of her criminal associates (representing the loss of a background), she should avoid jumping to the conclusion that her rival might have been behind it, remembering that the give-and-take agreement is entirely out-of-game. Additionally, a player shouldn't ask for or accept a concession of this sort if their intent is to escalate the conflict. For example, a Toreador seeks to use Dread Gaze on a bothersome Nosferatu. While this challenge seems to be an attempt to shoo her rival away, she shouldn't ask for a concession if her friends are waiting outside to attack. Doing so would constitute an escalation of the conflict. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, if you're on the receiving end of retaliation, you should roll with the scenario you're given, as you've already had your moment to shine.



Advanced Narration Chart

First Tier: Inconvenience/Skirmish

Concession Given	Retaliation Taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relenting to a supernatural power challenge and roleplaying its effects during an inconvenient situation. The result is unlikely to cause a loss of status/reown or generate gossip, though it may frustrate the subject. • Taking a premeditated loss in what amounts to a small scuffle, suffering 3 or fewer points of damage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of a background for a single evening • Loss of a single downtime action • Moderate difficulty feeding or travails that tax the target's supernatural reserves; character begins next game at 2/3 of maximum Blood/Gnosis pool (round in favor of the player) • Act of frustration that results in gaining a Beast Trait/Derangement Trait/Seethe Trait • Uncovering a minor background secret, such as a 1-point flaw (with Storyteller permission)

Second Tier: Embarrassment/Injury

Concession Given	Retaliation Taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relenting to a supernatural power challenge and roleplaying its effects in an embarrassing situation. The result may cause a loss of status/reown or generate gossip if the subject is important enough. • Taking a premeditated loss in what amounts to a major altercation, suffering between 4 and 6 points of damage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of up to 2 backgrounds for up to 2 game sessions • Loss of 1 month of downtime actions or 2 total downtime actions, whichever is greater • Significant difficulty feeding or travails that tax the target's supernatural reserves; character begins next game at 1/2 of maximum Blood/Gnosis pool (round in favor of the player) • An act of great frustration that results in gaining 2 Beast Traits/Derangement Traits/Seethe Traits • Uncovering embarrassing background secrets, such as a 3-point flaw (with Storyteller permission)

Third Tier: Humiliation/Incapacitation

Concession Given	Retaliation Taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relenting to a supernatural power challenge and roleplaying its effects in a potentially humiliating situation. A loss of status/reown is probable, and the incident is likely fodder for horrendous gossip, even if the subject is relatively unknown. • Taking a premeditated loss in what amounts to a serious conflict, suffering between 7 and 9 points of damage, and likely resulting in incapacitation and/or capture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term loss of a single background due to death or removal of connected NPCs • Loss of 2 months' downtime actions or 4 total downtime actions, whichever is greater • Immense difficulty feeding or travails that tax the target's supernatural reserves; character begins next game at 1/3 of maximum Blood/Gnosis pool (round in favor of the player) • An act of immense frustration that results in gaining 3 Beast Traits/Derangement Traits/Seethe Traits • Uncovering major background secrets, such as 3+ point flaws (with Storyteller permission)

Advanced Narration: Steps to Resolution

Step 1: Make an Agreement

Prior to resolving a challenge, both parties should converse and offer reasons why one character would likely succeed in this situation. Both should agree on the degree of conflict (tier) this situation supports. Afterward, the players should make a Storyteller aware of their agreement and the advantage given to the relenting party.

Step 2: Relent to the Challenge

The conceding party “does the job” and relents to the challenge, accepting the consequences and roleplaying accordingly.

Step 3: Chose a Method of Retaliation

The relenting party meets with the Storyteller and picks an option from the right column of the appropriate chart above. While the relenting party is free to incorporate her character’s mechanical capabilities, the bar for achieving any of these effects should be relatively low. It is perfectly fine if disbelief needs to be suspended somewhat to achieve a desired outcome; the relenting player has already “earned” this outcome as part of her earlier cooperation.

Step 4: Tell the Story

The Storyteller informs the player who won the previous challenge of both the mechanical and narrative results of the subsequent retaliation. That player accepts the consequences and roleplays accordingly.

Example 1: *Hugo the Tremere is the ranking Archon at a conclave. During a recess, Levi the Anarch Malkavian approaches him with an exhaustive list of issues, demanding that the Anarchs be heard. Hugo suggests to Levi that a better idea might be to take the list outside and set it on fire, and the player informs the other that he wishes to use the Dominate power of Mesmerism on Levi. As success in this challenge would initiate a dramatic outcome, the player of Hugo proposes Advanced Narration. Both players are amicable, and agree that in exchange for the player of Levi relenting to the use of Dominate, the player of Hugo will agree to narration later on, effectively owing him one. Both parties also agree that the matter is an inconvenience for Levi.*

The second night of the conclave, the player of Levi approaches the Storyteller. As his character has connections with various gangs, he wants to send some of them after Hugo. The Storyteller agrees, and later notifies the player of Hugo that he is accosted

by a group of thugs on his way to rejoin the conclave. While he dispatches the assailants with ease, he has some difficulty feeding. He enters play at 2/3 of his total Blood pool. The player of Hugo accepts the narration, as he has given his consent in exchange for the player of Levi relenting the night before.

Example 2: *Hazel the Assamite is a Black Hand operative who wishes to extract some information from a particularly recalcitrant Loyalist, Vinny the Lasombra. She finds him alone, and declares her intent to initiate combat, seeking to capture him. Hazel’s intentions are non-lethal, and her character is especially adept at ambushes, but her player realizes the scene could go either way. She proposes Advanced Narration. In exchange for agreeing to be captured, the player of Vinny asks for a concession later on, noting that being captured is at the third tier. Both parties agree, and begin a scene where Vinny is being held at a nearby warehouse.*

Vinny is released at the conclusion of the scene, and he has an axe to grind. He approaches the Storyteller, and mentions that he has some Allies in the Order of St. Blaise. He wants to make travel difficult for Hazel, to the point that it affects her downtime actions. The Storyteller agrees, and tells Hazel after game that her travel plans as a Black Hand operative have become immensely difficult, taking her much longer to get from point A to point B. She loses her next 4 downtime actions as a result. Although Hazel has some Influence pertaining to travel that she feels would normally come into play, as this is part of the agreement she made with the player of Vinny, she agrees to roll with it.

When the Story Has Run its Course

While a cooperative conflict can certainly be fulfilling, like all stories, it can be susceptible to a life cycle. When a conflict ceases to be entertaining, or no longer feels right, it may be best to abandon it. This resolution is often a simple matter if the conflict is cooperative. As part of the collaborative process, the participants could work out an outcome together, possibly escalating matters into a competitive scenario or a storyline where differences are resolved. Alternatively, circumstances within the game as a whole may have changed, possibly giving both parties bigger fish to fry.

Conflict between characters is challenging and enriching, and in a cooperative conflict, it’s important that the cooperative story works for both participants. All parties should have the opportunity to shine, but also the right to go a different direction when it stops working. With a little cooperation from the right partner, it’s something that can be savored over the course of a storyline.

Biography

Some call him the Adonis Quarterback of LARP. Some call him the Gangster of Love. He has an unnatural love for bears. **Jimmy Reckitt** is a developer for **By Night Studios** who's worked on **Mind's Eye Theater Werewolf: The Apocalypse**, **MET: Pickering Lythe**, and

MET: Storyteller Secrets. A proud Chicagoan, Jimmy ran the Chicago One World by Night chronicle for a number of years as its head storyteller. When he's not writing, Jimmy enjoys spending time at the gym and taking circus classes. He is currently trying to explain to his parents and coworkers just what exactly a LARP is after they heard about Werewolf.



MIND'S EYE THEATRE: IMMERSION SECRETS

is an anthology of 14 essays written by members of the World of Darkness LARP community and the By Night Studios development team. It offers methods and techniques for encouraging player immersion and safety at Mind's Eye Theatre LARP events. These tools and guidelines are applicable to any LARP experience.